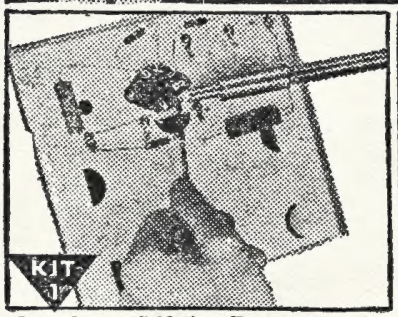
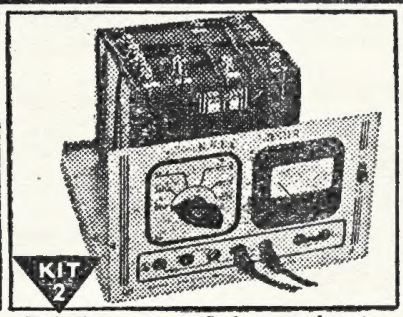
MISSING PAGE

I Will Show You How to Learn RADIO by Practicing in Spare Time

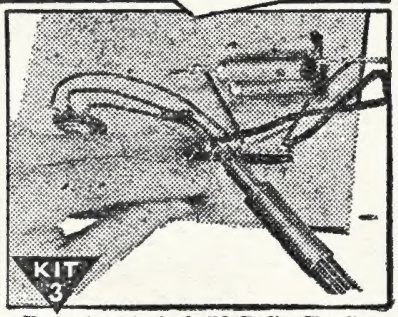
I Send You Big Kits of Radio Parts



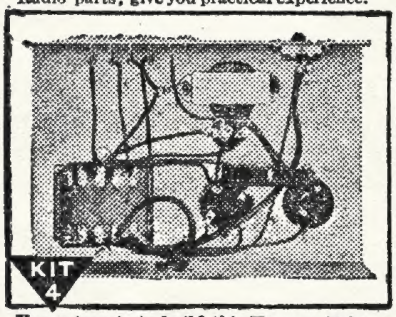
I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering, how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



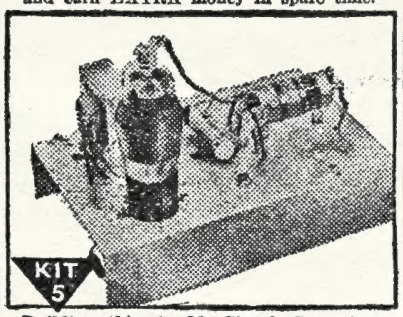
Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



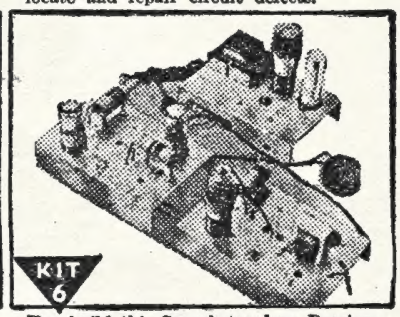
You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits, how to locate and repair circuit defects.



You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



You build this Superheterodyne Receiver which brings in local and distant stations—and gives you more experience to help you win success in Radio.

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by Hascal Giles

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THE TEXAN.....*by Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson* *82*
Serving under peacock-proud Captain Willard, Cy Hawkins was hired as an Army wagon boss—but when the Apaches raided, he showed other talents!

SHORT STORIES

THE DEVIL'S EYE.....*by Harold F. Cruickshank* *62*
While grim drought threatens, Dal Baldwin prepares for a showdown battle

TROUBLE MAKES A BID.....*by Dan Kirby* *73*
The struggling nesters of Hartshorn find a real champion in Roe Cassity

THE DRIFTER.....*by Clark Gray* *97*
Because Jim Purcell used to be an outlaw, the town thought he still was

AND

TRAIL CAMP.....*by Foghorn Clancy* *6*
A friendly department of live-wire news and chatter of ranch and rodeo life

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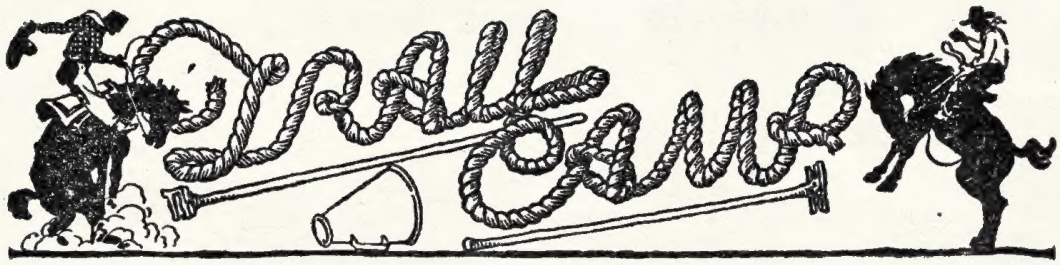

A Department for Readers Conducted by FOGHORN CLANCY

America's Most Famous Rodeo Expert and Handicapper

HI WADDIES, let's draw up in front of the old fireplace or around the Trail Camp fire, and get caught up to date on our range and rodeo news and gossip.

You remember the last time we met at the Trail Camp I gave you the leaders at that time in the season's race for championship titles under the International Rodeo Association point award system. At that time the leader for the title of all-around champion cowboy was the defending champion Gene Rambo. Jerry Ambler, also a defending champion, was leading in the saddle bronc riding, Bud Linderman was leading for the title of steer wrestling champion, Jimmy Schumacher was leading in the bareback bronc riding, Buck Sorrells was leading in the calf roping, Wag Blessing was leading in the bull riding, and Carl Arnold was leading in the steer roping.

The Final Winners

Now let's see how they finished. The IRA has compiled the points of all contestants for the season and officially announced the winners.

Bud Linderman, who was in second place when we met at the Trail Camp last time, forged to the front and won the all-around title. Jerry Ambler retained his lead and won the title in saddle bronc riding. Homer Pettigrew, who was in second place in the steer wrestling, went into the lead and finished as the champion.

Carl Mendes came on from second place to win the title in bareback bronc riding, Buck Sorrells retained his lead and won the calf roping title, and Wag Blessing did the same in bull riding, while in steer roping Clark McIntire came from away back and won the championship.

These season championship races are just like any other race, no one can tell just who is going to be the winner until the race is over, because often one and then another takes the lead during the season, and many times a fellow will be in the lead until about the middle or near the close of the season and then sustain an injury that will put him out of the running. That's what happened to Jack Faver, who started in steer wrestling like a sure winner for the season, but was injured and never really got back in good form.

The Last Roundup

We wish to pay tribute to one of the greatest cowboys who ever lived, who has ridden on over the hill, on to the last Roundup. He had escaped death in the arena perhaps in a hundred close calls, and then it caught up with him recently in the form of an automobile wreck. He was Bob Crosby, former world's champion cowboy, holder of the famed Roosevelt Trophy valued at $5,000, which he had to win three times in order to become the permanent possessor. This trophy was intended for the cowboy winning the most points at both Cheyenne Frontier Days at Cheyenne, Wyoming, and the Pendleton Roundup at Pendleton, Oregon, and Crosby won it first in 1925, again in 1927, and the third time in 1928.

Born at Midland, Texas, February 27th, 1897, he won his first steer roping contest at Chelsea, Oklahoma, when he was but thirteen years old. He went on to become one of the most colorful and one of the greatest cowboys the rodeo arena has ever known.

He was one of the contestants at the World's Championship Rodeo in Madison Square Garden every year from 1923 to 1942, with the exception of 1929. He won the calf roping at the Garden in 1923, 1927 and 1928.

In 1927 and 1928 his winnings in rodeo are said to have been $46,000, and with this money he bought and stocked a good sized ranch in New Mexico.

Crosby discontinued competition in bronc riding in 1928 but was still tops in steer and calf roping and wild cow milking up to the

(Continued on page 8)

THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—*get across to him or her your ideas*? That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby these things can be *intentionally*, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have privately taught this nearly-lost art of the practical use of mind power.

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TRAIL CAMP

(Continued from page 6)

time of his death, despite the fact that he had been injured more than perhaps any other cowboy. He received a broken right leg at the Prescott, Arizona, Rodeo in 1930. The limb never healed properly, causing him to wear a brace on that limb, yet even with this handicap he was still one of the world's fastest steer and calf ropers.

Bob Crosby will live long in the memory of rodeo folks and fans. He was a great cowboy, a frank, unassuming, affable fellow, with charity always in his heart. He was not a rowdy, and lived an admirable life free of bad habits. He was a cowgentleman!

Championship Rodeo

The 1947 Roy Rogers Championship Rodeo at the Chicago Stadium did a little bigger business than in previous years, having a wonderful turnout of patrons. In fact, at the second Saturday matinee, there were about two thousand kids who could not get in at all as all standing room was already sold. So put out were the kids that they started a juvenile riot on the Madison Street side of the Stadium. An extra squad of police were called out, but did not scare the kids, and the police did not wish to use impolite tactics. Andy Frain, of Frain's Service, who has charge of the gates and tickets of the Stadium, came to the rescue by digging deep into his own pocket and furnishing each kid with an ice cream cone and a Roy Rogers cowboy novelty, thus pacifying the kids and ending the riot.

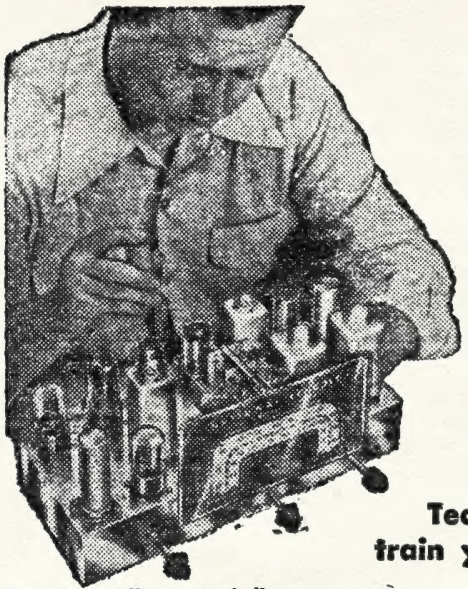
Col. Jim Eskew furnished the stock for the rodeo. The Judges were Bill Parks and Ole Rice. The timer was Mary Parks; arena secretary, Bob Matthews; announcer, Clay Hockman.

The final results in bronc riding were: First, Vic Schwarz; Second, Claude Morris; Third, Shirley Hussey; Fourth, Sonny Tureman.

Perry Franks won the calf roping, Sonny Holcomb was second, Whit Keeney was third and Skinner Smith fourth.

Gus Bartley copped the bareback bronc riding, Carl Williams was second, Paul Bond was third, and fourth was split between Fess Reynolds and Sonny Tureman. Buck Dowell was best man in the steer wrestling, Bill Lowry was second, Leonard Milligan was

(Continued on page 105)



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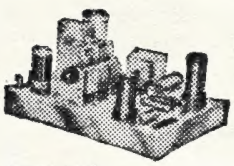

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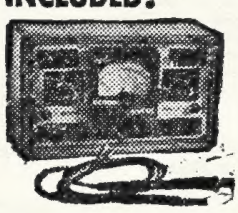

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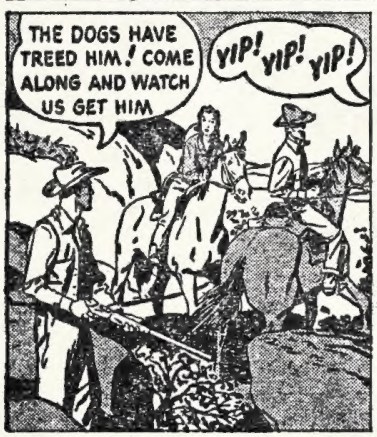

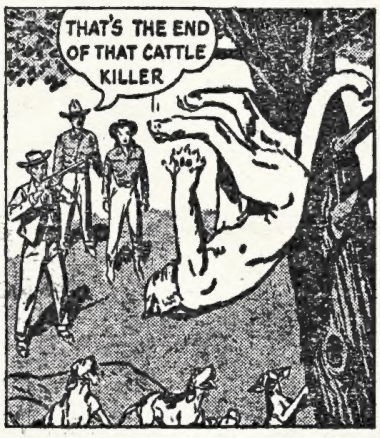

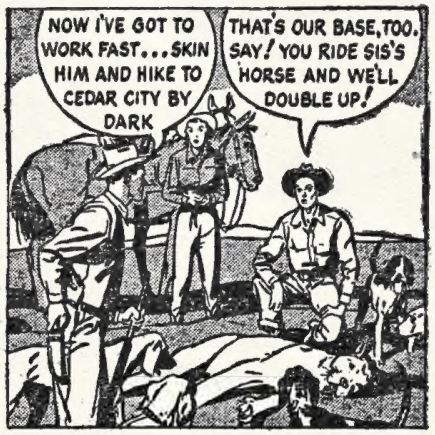

DINNER? THANKS, BUT I'D BETTER DRIVE TO THE RANCH. I'M HARDLY IN SHAPE TO APPEAR IN PUBLIC
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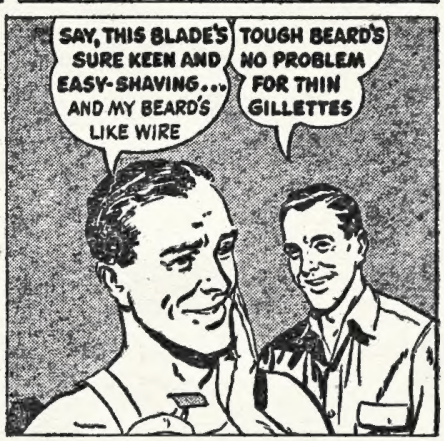
HOTEL
LATER



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SIGN OF THE STRADDLE BUG

One of Caleb Thorn's guns spat lead and flame (CHAP. XI)

A STEVE REESE NOVEL BY HASCAL GILES

The three fearless avengers take the trail of a mysterious foeman who deals death under a strange and sinister emblem!

CHAPTER I

Men Without Faces

MIN Bowman threw her knitting aside and got up from the cane-bottom rocking chair where she had been sitting for the past hour, keeping her fingers busy to free her mind of worry. She walked over to the front window and stopped beside the big, leather-faced man who stood there with his arms folded across his massive chest and the lamplight shimmering on his tousled gray hair.

He did not turn to look at her, but he knew she was there, and for a moment they both stood looking silently out over the dark, rolling prairie which fell

away from the B Bar B ranchhouse. She could tell by the way her husband's keen blue eyes squinted, and the way he let the crooked-stem pipe hang idly in one corner of his wide mouth that he was also becoming uneasy.

WITH a woman's intuition, Min Bowman had sensed trouble an hour ago. She had been worried since the note arrived last month warning them to leave Comanche Valley within thirty days, but her fear had just reached a climax. Now the time was up. She had wished a thousand times that she had been able to persuade big Blaine Bowman to obey that grim warning, for the intervening days had been a heart-breaking nightmare.

They were new here, and trouble had started with loss of half their cattle to night-riding rustlers after the first week. Later, the only two cowboys they had hired were killed in their saddles—shot in the back from long range.

Each time they had found that mysterious symbol near the scene of disaster which made Long Lem Carson's threat of revenge a frightening reality. But the fear which was now clouding Min's pale face was the worst of all. It was a mother's fear, and she could keep it to herself no longer.

She laid her hand on the man's knotty arm and said, "Blaine, something has happened to Clyde. I feel it. The stage from Austin was due in Comanche at eight o'clock. That's been two hours. He's had plenty of time to see if those fellows you sent for are coming in tonight. He should have been back."

For a moment, Blaine Bowman did not say anything. He slid one gnarled hand over his wife's fingers and looked down at her, a small, dainty woman with graying hair and eyes that were dark and oddly youthful. He reflected, with a pang of regret, that her eyes had sparkled and danced with the same fire he had known thirty years ago until they had come to Comanche. Now they were dull with worry and fatigue, and the skin across her forehead was showing its first deep wrinkles.

It had been because of her that Blaine Bowman had finally sent a call to the Cattlemen's Protective Association in Austin for help in his battle against the mysterious forces which were trying to force him to leave the ranch he had inherited in Comanche Valley.

Bowman had wired the CPA a week before to send one of their investigators to his B Bar B ranch, and it was time for the request to be answered. Unless help arrived soon it would be too late, and that was why he had allowed his only son, young Clyde Bowman, to meet the stage tonight.

Despite the fact that the Bowmans were unwelcome visitors in the little cowtown eight miles to the south, Clyde Bowman had insisted that he go into town to escort the CPA representative to the B Bar B without delay.

For the past few minutes, the big rancher had been making excuses to himself about his son's failure to return. Clyde was a good boy, handy with cattle and able to take care of himself in any kind of fair fight. But he didn't get into town often and he'd naturally want to let off a little steam. He had probably stopped for a few drinks. He might even play a few hands of poker at the Town House Bar before he left. Perhaps the stage had been late and Clyde was still waiting.

As soon as his wife brought her thoughts into the open, however, Blaine Bowman discarded his excuses. Clyde's ride tonight had been too important for dawdling. The youngster knew that. He knew his parents would be worried while he was alone in Comanche, and he had promised faithfully to ride there and back. Clyde never broke a promise.

Abruptly, Blaine Bowman walked away from the window and knocked the ashes from his pipe into the big stone fireplace at one end of the spacious parlor. A set of matched, ivory-handled six-guns hung from a peg above the mantelpiece, and he lifted them down. Moving with the deftness of a man experienced with guns, he fastened the twin belts around his brawny waist and thonged the holsters low on his bowed thighs.

He looked up at his wife and said, "You'd better wake Stella so she can sit up with you, Min. There's probably

nothin' to worry about, but I think I'll ride a ways toward town and see if I can meet Clyde somewhere."

The woman nodded with relief and started toward the stairway which led to the second floor of the comfortable log house. She had taken only a few steps when a tall, slender girl stepped into view on the landing. Though she was Blaine Bowman's niece, Stella Bowman showed little family resemblance.

STEVE REESE

She had flaming red hair that lighted the creamy tan of her face like an inward light, and her eyes were a peculiar blend of gray and green that gave her pretty face a contrasting dash of color.

After Stella's father, Curly Bill Bowman, had been killed by a sheriff's posse, the girl had decided to make her home with Blaine and Min Bowman. They had been surprised by the girl's sudden arrival, but happy to have another woman in the house. In the short time she had been with them, Blaine and Min had grown to love her, and they treated her as their own daughter.

"I heard you talking," Stella said quietly as she came into the room, "and I couldn't go back to sleep when I heard Clyde was still in town. Do you think anything is wrong, Uncle Blaine?"

Apparently the girl had been awake for some time, for she was dressed in her riding clothes—plain cowboy levis and flannel shirt. She wore no hat, but her shimmering hair was tied by a bright green ribbon. Though she had hardly known her outlaw father, Curly Bill Bowman, Stella Bowman was much like him. She had an insatiable appetite for action and excitement, and Blaine knew she had dressed with the intention of riding in search of Clyde.

Bowman picked up his hat and pulled it tightly down over his unruly gray hair. "I'll be as worried about you and Min as I am Clyde," he spoke to her firmly. "Our time is up here, accordin' to that crazy note, and anything is liable to happen. You can handle a gun as well as a man, Stella. Get my rifle and keep it in your lap. I'll get into Comanche and back as fast as I can."

DISAPPOINTMENT showed in the girl's eyes, but the tone of the rancher's voice told her that it would be useless to argue over the domesticity of her role. But a moment later Stella Bowman had all the violence and excitement she could ever have desired.

Bowman had walked across the room, and was bending down to kiss his wife on the cheek when it happened. He heard the click of a shod hoof against a rock not far away and he straightened quickly. Had he remained as he was, Blaine Bowman would have died—and he would have welcomed death rather than endure the dreadful ordeal that followed.

As the big-boned rancher whirled to look out the window, a bullet blistered the pane and sent slivers of glass flying around him with a spanging sound. As if in a fleeting dream, he felt the fiery slug zoom past him and heard the whooshing sound of hot lead burrowing into live flesh.

Min Bowman screamed then—a choking, fearful scream that died in her chest. All in the same instant, Bowman heard the sound of her frail body falling behind him.

Half-stunned, the big rancher turned and knelt beside his wife. His long arms went under her, lifted her as though she were a child. He stood up, hugging her to his chest, and paused in his tracks a moment like a man in a trance. Then he carried her into the hall and on into her bedroom, great stinging tears rolling down his seamed face as he walked. A trail of blood marked his course through the house, and the man felt it warm and sticky on his arms.

After he put her gently down on the bed, Bowman waited for her to smile up at him, reassuringly, as she always did when he was worried. When Min did not smile, he knew she was badly hurt.

The memory of the picture of wealth and happiness he had painted for her in Comanche Valley brought a swelling, choking lump to his throat. He had wanted to do so much for Min. He had tried. It had been others who had stolen the happiness away from her. And now they had wounded her, perhaps killed her.

Vaguely, Bowman heard the sound of running horses and stamping feet at the front of the house. He moved away from the bed at last, his hand seeking the butt of his gun. He brushed against someone, and was aware that Stella was behind him, gazing wildly down at the still figure on the bed.

"Is—is she—"

"She's bad hurt," the man said fiercely. "Who's that comin in?"

Stella Bowman did not answer him. She made a choking sound in her throat, and ran away from him screaming, her voice keening through the house like a wailing wind.

"They killed her! Killed her! She was so—good to me, and now they've killed her!"

As Bowman came into the hall, he heard Stella going out the back door, still screaming the same words and running madly. Her cry was interrupted momentarily by a man's voice, and Blaine wondered who it could have been. And then he knew!

There were six of them, all with guns in their hands. Three men came into the hall from the parlor, and three more came in through the back door. At first Blaine Bowman thought it was all a bad dream, because the men closing in on him looked like denizens of another world.

From the waist down, each man displayed levis and boots and studded gunbelts. But the upper part of their bodies was lost in the gloom of the unlighted hall. Strange black hoods draped from their heads to their waists, hiding their features and the shape of their shoulders in loose folds. The only break in the fantastic costumes was the thin slits for eyes and protruding arms.

When the towering, incongruent figure nearest him spoke in a muffled voice, Blaine Bowman knew he was facing death instead of a nightmare.

"Git yore hand off that gun, Bowman," the figure ordered gruffly. "We missed yuh out there, but we won't miss in here."

The threatening voice did something to the rancher. He remembered everything now, and he came back to his senses. He had been worried about Clyde, and he had started in search of him. He had stopped to kiss Min. Now Min was near death!

Blaine Bowman did not move a muscle while a man behind him talked.

"I couldn't stop that red-headed she-devil," the man said. "She's plumb wild. Tried to claw my eyes out!"

"Let her go," the first spokesman cut in. "When she sees what happens to Blaine Bowman, she'll never come back. Yuh thought you could throw Long Lem Carson off'n this land and git by with it, didn't yuh, Bowman?" the hooded spokesman continued. "Well, yuh can't! He told yuh he'd teach yuh to respect a homesteader's straddle bug claim, but I don't reckon yuh'll live that long. Drop yore guns, Bowman, and come on!"

THE big rancher had not moved since he had first halted at sight of the odd figures, and he did not seem to pay much attention to what they said. His eyes were flat and hard, and his face was a sagging mask of shock and grief.

"Yuh wounded my wife," he accused. "Shot her down in cold blood!"

"That was a mistake," the hooded man

The fury of the Rocking T gun crew was not halted by the fire from the house—and Reese and his men were dangerously outnumbered (CHAP. XVI)

growled, his voice flat and impersonal. "We meant to get you. We're goin' to correct that mistake. Move!"

Like a man dreaming, Bowman repeated: "Yuh shot my wife!"

And then he was moving.

The big rancher took a swift step to the side, and snatched his gun free. Even as he moved the man behind him fired, but Blaine Bowman's gun spoke an instant sooner. Flame licked out from his gunhand, and the man beside him yelled in terror. The fellow bent in the middle, sank to the floor, and Bowman saw the damp stain of blood showing on the front of his flowing robe.

Desperately, the rancher tried to trigger his Colt again, but a pair of wiry arms grasped him from behind and held him helpless. Then someone swung a gun-butt at him with stunning force, and Bowman went down. The room rocked about him, and then he was drifting away with pinpoints of flame showering his vision . . . .

When Blaine Bowman came to himself, he was draped across the saddle of a horse. He opened his eyes slowly against the pain in his head and looked about him. It took only a moment to collect his thoughts, and the memory was terrifying.

But he had little time to review the horror of the night. The hooded figures were still around him. The body of the man he had killed at the house was tied to a saddle, but the others were leaning idly against the flanks of their waiting horses. Bowman saw that they were in a shallow arroyo a mile from the B Bar B. And he knew why they were here.

The horse which had carried the rancher was standing under the jutting limb of a gnarled cottonwood tree. There was a rope around Blaine's neck, and he could feel the weight of the noose enough to know what it was—a hangman's loop!

A few feet away, near the base of the tree, Bowman saw something that indicated his fate as clearly as the rope, for the hooded killers had already set the stage for death. They had driven three stakes into the ground, the base of the poles spread wide and the tops drawn together like a tripod. It was the mocking mark of a nester's claim, a straddle bug. Blaine had found the same grim symbol anchored on the ground where his two cowboys were ambushed weeks before. He wondered which of the robed killers was Long Lem Carson, the nester.

As Bowman looked up, the hooded figures around him stirred anxiously. The towering, wide-shouldered spokesman moved away from his horse and picked up the trailing end of the hangrope. He tossed it across the cottonwood limb and motioned to one of the others.

"He's awake now. Never like to string a man up when he don't know it. Set him up in the saddle and let's get it done. If we'd done this sooner, our worries would be over."

Two men shuffled over to Blaine's horse. With his hands bound, the rancher could offer no resistance while they twisted him around and shoved him upright in the saddle. The outlaw boss drew the rope taut and looped it around the bole of the tree, and the others moved aside to watch.

"You're goin' out just like yore brother Curly Bill should have gone, Bowman," the hooded killer said. "After the law finally caught him yuh should have knowed the ranchers wouldn't stand for his brother bein' in Comanche Valley."

ANGER stirred in Blaine Bowman's veins at the words, and the big rancher gave him a piercing look. For a moment he had resigned himself to fate, almost welcoming death. But now his mind was alert.

Their conversation was a contradicting hint to their identity. Were they angered nesters from the settlement to the north, organized to aid Long Lem Carson in his vow of revenge? Or were they the suspicious owners of nearby ranches who feared the nearness of Curly Bill Bowman's brother to their spreads? How were they to profit by Blaine Bowman's death?

Cold sweat popped out on Bowman's wrinkled brow as the big spokesman swaggered closer and prepared to slap the horse from under him. In another few minutes he would be dangling at the end of a choking rope, still wondering what had happened to his son and if his wife had survived her injury. He would never know why his inheritance of Curly Bill Bowman's ranch had unleashed the forces of evil against him.

The hooded killer raised his hand, said, "This is it, Bowman. Any last words?"

Blaine Bowman opened his mouth to speak, preparing to fling a final defiant challenge at the cowardly killers. But before his lips could form the words, another voice came out of the darkness. Even the rancher gave a start as the steel-edged order cut into the straining stillness of the night.

"Cut him down, mister," the rich, even voice commanded harshly. "Cut him down quick, or I'll put a bullet through you!"

CHAPTER II

Invitation to Death

SURPRISE held the wide - shouldered spokesman as if he were frozen, his upraised arm still poised. The hooded figures around him whirled, their waist-length costumes rustling. Then slowly the big man's hand started easing downward, dropping toward the holstered gun on his hip.

But his nerve wilted as a lone rider came boldly out of the shadows, a leveled .38 Colt in each hand. Even in the gloom of the night, he was a commanding figure, and the firmness of his visage sent the leader's hands above his shoulders again.

The rider was a tall, well-made man dressed in worn cowboy levis and a brush-scarred corduroy coat. The hair showing beneath the curled brim of his brown Stetson was coal black, his eyes equally dark, and now burning bright with anger. A premature tinge of gray at his temples made his square-cut brown face impressive and distinctive. Around his wiry waist were two bullet-filled gun-belts, and he sat the saddle of his big bay with an easy grace.

Aside from the imposing face, the rider looked like an ordinary cowhand, or a roving gunman. The hooded leader stared speculatively at him, trying to decide which of these he might be.

His beady eyes gleaming through the slits in the hood, the big man said, "You'd been smarter, stranger, if you'd rode on through Comanche Valley. Sidin' the brother of Curly Bill Bowman will get yuh killed! Who are you, anyway?"

"Names ain't important, pard," the rider answered evenly, "but since you'll be seein' more of me, you may as well know. I'm Steve Reese of the CPA."

Reese's voice was the rich drawl of the Southwest, but it crackled with anger. Though he had been born in the East and extensively educated, Stephen Reese, field chief of the Cattlemen's Protective Association, could readily adapt himself to the manner and speech of a native frontiersman. He had once been a lieutenant of detectives on the St. Louis Police Force, but the restless fires of adventure that burned in him had led him to resign the position to join the more exciting Western organization.

Since then he had mastered the chores of an ordinary cowhand well. He could ride and rope to the satisfaction of the most critical range boss, and there were few men alive who could match his ability with a six-gun or in a rough and tumble fight.

With his two trail partners, Hank Ball and Dusty Trail, Steve Reese had solved countless problems of rangeland lawlessness by combining his knowledge of metropolitan crime detection with range savvy. Though Reese was much more likely to depend on his keen powers of deduction and perception than he was the cruder methods of most western lawmen, he was not averse to the use of his two black Colts when the situation demanded it.

Such wise discretion had branded him as the CPA's ace investigator, the man who drew the toughest assignments. Recognizing the need for clear thinking as well as daring action, Colonel George Beauvine, president of the organization, had immediately chosen Reese for the job in Comanche Valley when Blaine Bowman's request for help had come into the CPA office.

Despite the fact that he had a comfortable office in CPA headquarters at Austin, Steve Reese was always eager to swap his tailored business suit for chaps and levis, and his swivel chair for a saddle. When trouble arose, Reese always went to the source, and there were many rangeland renegades who

had lived to respect the field chief's prowess with guns and fists. There were others who had not.

Until Reese identified himself, the hooded outlaws had not fully realized the extent of their danger. But now they knew. Here was a man of whom some of them had heard, a relentless, skillful adversary who had an obsession for justice and an inborn hatred for men who lived by their guns. His name sent an electrifying tenseness through them, and desperation spurred them into a wild urge to escape.

The towering, hooded spokesman dropped his hand in a blur of speed, dragging free his holstered gun. It was a lightning-fast move, but Reese's keen eyes had seen the draw born in the tightening of the man's wrist muscles. Reese's righthand Colt barked harshly, and the man's gun spun away with the explosion. The leader yelped in pain, ramming his stinging fingers under his armpit for comfort. The others threw their weapons down in despair, raising their hands in surrender as Reese gestured with the Colt.

"That could have been closer, mister," Reese said angrily. "Now cut the man down like I said. The rest of you stand hitched. Don't get any ideas, because you can't even guess how many men I've got in the brush around you."

COWED by Reese's unerring aim, the outlaws obeyed at once. The man nearest Blaine Bowman's horse snatched the hangrope free, untying the rancher's hands with jerky, fearful movements. Reese had been too busy with the others to look closely at the bound man, but now he heard the grateful sigh of relief as Bowman flexed his cramped arms and took up his mount's reins in shaking fingers.

"All right, old-timer," the field chief said, "ride for the hills. I'll be along behind yuh."

The big spokesman made a snarling sound of helpless rage as Blaine Bowman galloped hurriedly away. "You've bought yoreself a whole passel of enemies, Reese! You'll see what it costs yuh!"

Reese's cool chuckle veiled the anger in him. "If I had more time I'd do a little seein' myself by taken' them hoods off yuh. Justice never wears a mask. I'm takin' up your invitation to get killed by sidin' Blaine Bowman, and I'm handin' out one of my own. If you want to die, just try to follow us!"

Before the man could reply, Steve Reese was gone. He pivoted the bay in an expert turn, and melted rapidly into the night. He came out of the arroyo at a sharp angle, cut behind a screen of stunted cedars, and spurred quickly after the retreating rancher. Reese rode close to his mount's neck, one of his guns still held warily in his hand.

But the hooded outlaws did not follow. His hint of others hiding in the brush had made them cautious. But it was only a bluff, for Reese had no other help at present. That was why he had not risked unmasking the outlaws against such odds.

As was his custom, Reese had not yet shown the full strength of the CPA in Comanche Valley. He wanted to know more of the task before him first. At dusk that day, he and his two trail partners Hank Ball and Dusty Trail, had separated to approach the valley from different routes. Hank and Dusty had gone on into the town of Comanche to see what they could learn about the strange happenings of which Blaine Bowman had hinted in his telegram to the CPA. Reese would meet them there later.

Sending the bay rapidly up a brushy slope, Reese searched the dark land ahead of him for Blaine Bowman. He had expected the man to wait for him as soon as he was out of gun range, but now he saw Bowman going out of sight on the crest of the hill, riding his horse recklessly. A puzzled frown cut into Reese's wide forehead, and he urged his horse to a faster pace.

It was a wild ride through country unfamiliar to him, and Reese gave the bay its head as he pounded through tugging chaparral and rocky washes. At last he came out on a rising plain, and overtook the rancher in a determined burst of speed.

"Whoa, there!" Reese yelled, coming alongside. "You tryin' to lose me, pard?"

Bowman turned in the saddle, a growing fear in his face. "My wife!" the rancher gasped without slowing. "That crew back there shot her when they was tryin' to get me. She may be dyin'!"

Reese's frown deepened, a knot of muscle growing along the rim of his

lean jaw. He had left Austin the day Bowman's call for aid arrived, and he had traveled only by the fastest trains and stages. But all his speed had not been enough. The disaster Bowman had feared had already struck, and Reese knew now that he had witnessed only a part of it.

Their horses matching strides, Reese told the rancher of his arrival in the region. The stage had split a hub at Lizard Well, fifteen miles east of Comanche, and Reese had rented a horse there in the hope of reaching the B Bar B sooner. He had been headed for the ranch when he heard the distant reverberations of gunfire.

By the time he had found the trouble, the hooded killers were preparing to hang Blaine Bowman. He had remained hidden long enough to learn the rancher's identity, but he knew nothing of the men who had captured him.

The field chief's presence seemed to soothe Bowman's nerves somewhat, and he became more calm. "Thank the stars yuh did show up, Reese! Another minute there and I'd been ready for buryin'. A man's life is hard to offer thanks for."

YELLING across at him above the noise of the running horses, Bowman told Reese of the attack at the house, and of his son's failure to return from town. The old rancher was tortured with concern for his entire family, and Reese was touched with sympathy. The CPA had never been called to help a man who was in more dire need of it.

"Who do yuh think was behind this raid tonight, Bowman?" he asked. "Was that a vigilante committee, or a bunch of rustlers tryin' to steal your stock without bein' interrupted? Your wire said rustlers were stealin' yuh blind, and all your neighbors were makin' war talk against you."

"The cattle losses are bad enough," Bowman said. He shook his head perplexedly, swinging around the base of a rocky ridge and turning up a hollow toward the ranch buildings ahead. "If they get the rest of my herd, I'm broke. But I think it's more than that. It ain't the cattle they want. They want to get rid of me—either kill me or run me out.

"I can't put my finger on the man behind it, but I know two men that would celebrate my funeral. One of them is

Reese ducked the thrown knife, and both his guns boomed as one (CHAP. VIII)

Long Lem Carson. Carson's a nester and has a grudge ag'in me. Tack Gordon's the other. He owns the Rocking T Ranch and leads the ranchers like they was haltered cows. Gordon has the whole range stirred up ag'in' me because I'm Curly Bill Bowman's brother. It's a mess that'll take a lot of explainin', Reese. Right now I want to get to Min, and see if Clyde has showed up yet. Mebbe they got him, too."

Bowman clamped his mouth shut and galloped ahead of the field chief, his eagerness increasing as the house came into view. By the orange glow of lamplight in the front windows, and the blue haze from the crescent moon overhead, Reese could see that the B Bar B headquarters buildings were comparatively new. The peeled logs of the big, T-shaped house were not yet weathered, and the paint of the trimming was still clean. Beyond the main buildings he could see a corral and a big, round-roofed hay barn.

Anxious over the welfare of his wife and son, Bowman set a horse-killing pace until they were through the grove of pines which framed a lane to the house. The field chief did not attempt to keep up, and Bowman was already striding toward the porch when Reese dropped his reins and stepped down.

Reese arrived just in time. Before the CPA man was aware of another's presence, Blaine Bowman had stopped in his tracks, his bowed legs tense and his shoulders hunched aggressively. The big-boned rancher was staring furiously at the tall, overalled figure on the low veranda, and his gnarled right hand was already streaking toward one of the ivory-handled Colts which he had recovered from the outlaws before he left the arroyo.

"You got yore nerve, yuh yellow snake!" Bowman growled, advancing on the waiting man. "Yuh thought you could get that hood off and get here in time for an alibi! It won't work! I'm goin' to shoot yuh down like you shot my wife."

Taking the tall man by surprise, Blaine Bowman had his gun out and was rolling the hammer back when Steve Reese leaped down. A mere word could not have stopped the rancher, and Reese did not try it. Instead, his hand brushed swiftly down and up, and lead and flame cut into the night. The slug plopped into the dust at Blaine Bowman's heel, the explosion pulling him to a startled halt.

"Who is this man, Bowman?" the field chief asked calmly, ignoring the rancher's rage as Bowman whirled on him.

CHAPTER III

Man Without a Gun

HIS hands resting defiantly on his wiry hips, the gangling figure in overalls stepped into the light. His shoulders, wide and hard - muscled, were on a level with Reese's eyes, and the field chief had to tilt his head to look up into the freckled, sharp - chinned face. The flopping gray Stetson was set far enough back from his slanted, muddy-brown eyes to show that his hair was blond and curly.

"The name's Lem Carson," he drawled quietly. "Some call me Long Lem. I'm beholden to you, stranger, for stoppin' Bowman's play. I'm so much faster with a shootin' iron than he is, I didn't wear a gun when I rode over to see him. I didn't want to have to kill him. I've got a temper, too."

Reese acknowledged the man's thanks with a nod of his head, and introduced himself. Long Lem Carson hesitated a moment, and then shook hands with the field chief. At that moment, Steve Reese's alert mind recorded an odd observation.

Instead of rough, work-calloused hands, Carson's palms were as soft and pliable as those of a woman. Reese decided immediately that the man was more accustomed to the feel of smooth broadcloth against his long frame than he was rough levis. Why was the man posing as a farmer?

The field chief had heard enough from Blaine Bowman to know that the two men were bitter enemies and he eyed the nester suspiciously.

"Just why are you here, Carson?" he demanded.

Carson's eyes shifted to Blaine Bowman's ruddy face as he answered. "I

hear Bowman's been accusin' me of killin' his riders. I come to tell him he's a dirty liar! He's askin' for trouble unless he buttons his lip before he gets all the law in Texas lookin' wise-eyed at me. When I shoot at a man, I look him in the eye. I heard those two cowboys were backshot."

Bowman's fury overshadowed his haste to get inside, and he took a threatening step toward Long Lem Carson. "What about the straddle bugs that always mark the spot where somethin' happens? That's a nester's mark, Carson, and you promised me I'd regret the day I run yuh off this land and sent you across the ridge with the other farmers!"

"I was mad, Bowman. Crazy mad. I didn't mean anything like—like this."

Reese's eyes squinted thoughtfully. "So you've been inside the house?"

"Yes," Carson answered. "The woman is hit pretty hard. I stopped most of the bleeding."

Blaine Bowman's eyes clouded dully as he was pulled back to reality. He leaped to the porch, his breathing choked in his chest.

"Don't come back, Carson," he cried over his shoulder as he rushed inside. "If Min dies, I'll be gunnin' for you. Yuh better pray she don't!"

Silence drifted over the yard as the door slammed and Blaine Bowman disappeared. Carson looked at Reese and shrugged his shoulders.

"I reckon you've drunk all this in, mister. The next time we meet I guess that gun will be pointed at me."

Reese dropped the Colt back in place and grinned tightly. "That depends, Carson. Mebbe, mebbe not."

Long Lem Carson shrugged again and walked toward the barn where he had left his horse. The field chief did not miss the wary glint that had grown in the nester's eyes since he learned Reese represented the CPA.

"If you're ridin' to Comanche," Reese called quietly, "you might send a doctor and sheriff out here."

Without slackening his lengthy stride, Carson's answer came back to Reese flat and toneless. "For you I'll do that. A favor for a favor, and that makes us even."

For a moment Reese stared speculatively at Long Lem's bare waist, knowing that a gun would ride there from now on. There was an enmity in Carson which was quickly apparent, veiled only by his coolness and arrogance. He was not the kind that would resort to open violence, but he would be a sinister threat while he moved in concealment.

MARKING Carson in his mind as a man to remember, Reese climbed the three steps to the porch and went inside. He paused in the roomy, neatly-furnished parlor long enough to ascertain the arrangement of the house, and then started down the hall, guided by the sound of Blaine Bowman's movements.

He stepped into the bedroom, which Bowman had lighted now by a lamp, and saw Min Bowman on the bed. The woman's delicate face had turned to the pallor of her soft, silver hair, and her eyes were tightly closed. Her breathing was weak and slow, scarcely audible, and Reese knew she had lost much blood.

Blaine Bowman was kneeling beside the bed, a pan of hot water at his elbow. The old rancher had already started cleaning the wound, a torn gash through her right shoulder. Shock and pain had knocked her unconscious, and the loss of blood had kept her that way.

Reese moved forward and picked up the strips of white cloth which Bowman had left on a chair, folding them skillfully into bandages and compresses.

"How is she, Blaine?" the field chief asked softly, handing the rancher one of the cloths.

"Pretty bad," Bowman said worriedly. "A woman can't stand these things like a man. She needs a doctor."

"She'll get one," Reese said. He did not tell the man how he knew this, and Bowman's mind was too busy to be curious.

For the next few minutes they worked in silence, bandaging Min Bowman's torn shoulder and changing the covers to make her more comfortable. Afterward, the woman breathed with less effort, but Reese knew recovery would be doubtful for the next twenty-four hours, in her weakened condition.

When they had finished, Reese went outside to attend the horses, leading them to the barn stalls where feed and water were within their reach. He returned to the house and found Blaine Bowman seated in a rocking chair by

the window, his weary legs stretched out in front of him and his eyes fixed morosely on the scrubbed pine floor.

"There's nothin' to do but wait now," Bowman sighed. "Wait for Min and wait for Clyde."

The field chief sat down on the leather-covered couch across from the man. While they sat there, both conscious of the stillness of the grief-stricken house, Reese learned more of the trouble in Comanche Valley. Bowman talked slowly, a weighing sadness in his voice while he recounted everything that had happened since he came to the region. Afterward, it was not hard for Reese to understand the deepening lines of worry in the man's bronzed face.

The B Bar B Ranch had formerly belonged to Curly Bill Bowman, notorious border bandit of whom Reese had heard many times. Curly Bill had been the brother of Blaine Bowman. Though Blaine had never approved of his brother's lawless career, the family tie between them had been too strong to break. They had remained friendly, and Curly Bill claimed Blaine was the only person alive who treated him like a white man.

Curly Bill had been killed by a sheriff's posse in Comanche Valley a year ago when the outlaw had returned for a visit to his idle ranch. After the outlaw died, the posse found a letter in his pocket addressed to Lawyer Sid Topper of Comanche. The letter had been delivered by the sheriff, and it proved to be a crudely-written will, leaving all Curly Bill owned to his brother, Blaine Bowman.

As the rancher paused to look out the window, evidently preoccupied by thoughts of his son's absence, Reese asked about other relatives of the dead bandit.

"Bill had a wife and a daughter," Bowman replied, "but they never got along. Right after Stella was born, somethin' happened between Bill and his wife and they never lived together again. It wasn't until then that Bill went bad, robbin' and rustlin' and fightin' the law. The few times I saw him the last ten years, he seldom spoke of his wife. It was always with a curse when he did."

Shortly after he moved to the ranch, Bowman explained, Stella Bowman had arrived to visit them, saying only that her mother was working in a shop in El Paso.

"Where's the girl now?" Reese asked curiously. "You said she ran out of here screamin' when the trouble started."

HOUNDED by other worries, Blaine Bowman had momentarily forgotten Stella. Now he leaned forward in his chair, his eyes widening.

"She wasn't here when I came in a few minutes ago. You don't think they got her?"

"I don't know, Blaine," the CPA man replied. "The whole thing has me buffaloed so far. Where does the nester, Long Lem Carson, fit in?"

Anger flared in Bowman's face. "Right in the middle of it. I could kill that coyote like I was shootin' for a bounty."

"What do you know about him?"

"Not much. When I sold my little two-bit outfit up on the Red to come down here, Carson was waitin'. The old house which Curly Bill had built on this spread before folks knew who he was hadn't been used for years. It had been burned to the ground right recent, and I knowed Carson had done it. I had to take my money from the sale of the other ranch to build another house.

"I'd been countin' on that money as a nest egg to see me through down here. Now, with my cattle bein' stole, I'm worse off than before I ever saw this place. Right now my herd is just runnin' wild. There was a straddle bug claim staked out big as life about where this house stands, and it belonged to Long Lem. He had claimed the land because it wasn't bein' used.

"I found Carson livin' in a brush lean-to over near Comanche Creek. I told him the land was mine and he argued about it. Said it had been deserted for years and was open to squatters. He wanted to fight about it, and I had to get the drop on him and run him off. Long Lem swore I'd live to regret it."

Bowman turned for another look out the window, and Reese thought over the man's story. At last the field chief said, "It seems most folks around here could have told him it wasn't open range. Do you have a copy of Curly Bill's will?"

Bowman shook his head. "The only

copy of the will is in Sid Topper's office. Sid's been right nice to me, but he didn't know Long Lem was here. Tack Gordon and the other ranchers were hopin' Carson would bluff me out of the country. They don't want no truck with Curly Bill Bowman's brother."

His nerves keyed to a restless pitch, Blaine Bowman arose and paced nervously across the floor. Finally he walked toward the hallway for another look at his unconscious wife.

Over his shoulder he said, "Everything I got out of my Red River place went into buildin' this house and stockin' the B Bar B with cattle. If I lose it, I've lost the work of a lifetime. I'm across a barrel, Reese. I'm afraid they've hit the blow they promised this time, for I'm shore somethin' has happened to Clyde and Stella."

CHAPTER IV

Curly Bill's Man

WHILE the rancher was out of the room, it was Steve Reese's turn to arise and pace the floor in concentration. The old rancher appeared to be surrounded by enemies, but Reese's probing mind could find no definite signs of guilt against any of them. Bowman was disliked by the ranchers because he was the brother of an outlaw. This offered a new challenge to the dark-haired field chief's wisdom and skill, for he had never before tried to assure an entire range of another man's honesty.

But the wrongs which the man had suffered because of this prejudice and doubt—the rustling of his cattle and the cowardly attacks by masked men—left Reese with no choice in the matter. He had to undertake the task of helping Bowman, and the desire to do so was as strong within him now as was the duty of his mission.

The B Bar B seemed to be caught between two forces. Long Lem Carson, the tall nester, had vowed revenge because the rancher had forced the man from his claim there. Since then, Bowman had lost half his cattle and two of his riders had been killed. His wife was still unconscious from a bullet intended for Blaine Bowman, and the rancher, himself, had narrowly escaped death at the hands of a band of hooded killers. In addition, the man's only son was missing, and his pretty niece had run into the night and had not returned.

Behind the ferocity of the attacks on Blaine Bowman's family, Reese sensed a sinister undercurrent of mystery and intrigue. He had seen the harmless-looking claim marker which the hooded killers had prepared before they attempted to hang Blaine Bowman. In new territories open to homesteading, Reese had seen many like it. But never before had the meaning been the same.

Always before, the straddle bug had been a symbol of ownership, a pioneer's first notice to Nature that he had come to tame new land, to grow crops and make a home. Here in Comanche Valley, the sign of the straddle bug meant death!

Realizing that he and his two partners now shared the peril in which Blaine Bowman had lived for weeks, Reese

[*Turn page*]

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knew he must act swiftly. Bowman had received a mysterious note warning him to leave Comanche Valley within thirty days. The note's only signature had been a rough drawing of a straddle bug. The time was up, and to defy that note was to defy death. The sudden outburst of violence tonight proved that.

When Blaine Bowman came back into the room and sat down, Steve Reese turned to look at him and Bowman took a measure of encouragement from the determination and anger that showed in the field chief's dark eyes. Reese could tell by the rancher's somber look that Min Bowman was showing no signs of improvement. There was nothing more he could do here, and the thought of the men responsible for the woman's hurt riding free and unchallenged irked him.

When he had surprised the gang earlier, Reese had wanted to do nothing to further endanger the life of Blaine Bowman. Now that the man was free again, he ignored the odds against himself. He picked up his hat and moved toward the door.

"I never like to make promises, Bowman," he said quietly. "They're sometimes hard to keep. But I'm makin' you one, because the motives behind this thing rile me as much as the rustling of you stock. Somebody will answer for this. You can't help what your brother did. You've as much right here as Tack Gordon or anyone else.

"As for Long Lem Carson, he had no right to this land and he knows it. That hombre's no farmer. I'll lay you two to one he's a gambler by trade and that he's bought chips in a crooked game!"

"Where yuh goin?" Bowman asked quickly as the CPA man walked away.

The field chief pulled his hat close above his eyes and gave his twin Colts an adjusting push forward. "There's something strange about your boy Clyde stayin' this long in town. And I can't understand why your niece would desert you at a time like this. I'm goin' to nose around and see what I can find out, Blaine. I'll be back."

Although Reese's explanation was true, it was not complete. He was eager to get in touch with his two aides, Hank Ball and Dusty Trail. After talking with Bowman, Reese had mapped a plan of action which required the help of his trail partners. The mysterious killers were temporarily bluffed, and he expected the doctor and sheriff to arrive soon to keep Bowman company.

BEFORE Reese could leave the room, however, there came an interruption which made his job in Comanche Valley even more complicated. He was reaching for the door when the panel swung abruptly inward, almost knocking him off balance. As Reese ducked backward, a lean-hipped, brown-eyed young man in black Stetson and cowboy levis stepped inside and kicked the door shut behind him.

He had a thin, dark-skinned face and Reese saw that his rusty brown hair was long and thick at the back of his muscular neck. He had a single gunbelt slanted around his slim waist, and the low-tied holster was empty. The gun was in his hand, and the alertness of his shifting eyes warned Reese not to draw against him.

"Play it safe, gents," he said calmly, "and you won't get hurt."

He let his slitted eyes flicker over the muscular frame of Steve Reese for a moment, and then his glance settled on Blaine Bowman's wind-burned face.

"You're my man," he said to the rancher. "You're so much like Curly Bill I know you're his brother. Yuh ought to be makin' the divvy now, Bowman. I'm here to collect five thousand dollars in gold from you. Either that or I'll leave yuh five cents worth of lead to remember me by!"

Blaine Bowman's tired face registered astonishment, and Steve Reese stared curiously at the lean-hipped gunman. The determination in the man's voice was a deadly thing to hear.

"Yuh've come to the wrong place to get money, stranger," Blaine Bowman said nervously. "I'm as broke as you are."

The gunman chuckled tightly, his brown eyes flitting back and forth between Reese and the rancher, alert as a crouching cougar. "I ain't no stranger in these parts, Bowman. The name is Charlie Claw. I used to be Curly Bill's right hand man before I got caught and sent to prison. Now that I'm out I want what's comin' to me. There was six of us in on that New Mexico pack-train robbery, and Curly Bill never did pay off. My share was five thousand simoleons. I want it!"

A new light glimmered in Steve Reese's dark eyes as Charlie Claw continued to talk. The young outlaw advanced threateningly toward Blaine Bowman, his gun poised as if to strike. He seemed determined to claim his loot, and Reese could see the fear of a gun-whipping growing in Bowman's face.

Then the field chief's thoughts shifted abruptly. He had been standing near the window, watching the outlaw out of the corner of his eyes and listening tensely to the sounds of the night outside. At that moment he was rewarded by the sharp clatter of hoofs pounding up the lane toward the house, and he knew the sheriff and doctor had arrived at last. Charlie Claw heard the sound, too, and he whirled like a cornered wolf.

Reese had known Claw would do that, and he was waiting for him. The gunman had mistaken Reese's silence for hopeless surrender, but now he tasted the strength and cunning that had extricated Steve Reese from many an outlaw death trap.

Steve Reese's arms and legs moved with the flawless rhythm of roller bearings, and the speed of his action was that of a fleeting shadow. As the outlaw turned, Reese's left foot slid quickly forward and Charlie Claw reacted with a step of his own. Reese had done that to take the man's mind from the gun, and now it was too late for the outlaw to retreat. When Claw stepped away, Reese's left arm darted out like a thrusting lance, rapping the gunman's wrist and spilling the Colt from numbed fingers.

CHARLIE CLAW grunted in surprise, swung a smashing fist at the point of Reese's square chin. But the chin was not there when the blow swished past. Reese ducked like a bobbing swallow, his head coming up under Claw's guarding left. He rammed his right fist savagely into Charlie Claw's middle, bending the man over and driving him back with the wind whooshing out of his lungs.

The savage speed of Reese's attack made it a brief fight. Before Claw could recover his wind, the field chief bent swiftly and scooped up the fallen gun. Claw straightened and started forward, drawing up short when he saw the bore of his own Colt staring him in the face.

"Well, I'll be a—"

"You'll be a dead duck if yuh move!" Reese told him. Spurs jingled on the porch outside and the CPA man said, "I reckon yuh can talk to the sheriff some about that gold from the pack-train robbery now."

Charlie Claw's handsome face hardened into lines older than his years. Then suddenly he dived, his shoulders rounded to take the impact as he smacked into the solid glass pane of the window behind Reese. Glass shattered like tinkling chimes as the outlaw's feet disappeared through the opening and into the darkness outside.

Reese heard him strike the ground, and then come up running. He ran to the window, the gun raised. Charlie Claw was just going out of sight around the corner of the house, and Reese did not attempt a shot at his back. There was something about the slim outlaw that puzzled Reese, and he thought the puzzle might be answered sooner if Claw remained free. He was sure it would not be their last meeting.

"What's goin' on here? What's all the racket?"

Shoving the outlaw's gun into the waistband of his levis, Reese turned toward the door. A meek-looking little man with skinny, sloping shoulders and a long, sad-eyed face came into the room. His clothes hung loosely on his spare frame, and the big nickeled star on his chest made one side of his sleeveless vest sag haphazardly. It was incredible, Reese thought, that such a weakling had tracked down and captured an outlaw as daring as Curly Bill Bowman.

With the sheriff were two other men. One of them was a fat, rosy-cheeked man with bushy gray sideburns, who carried a glistening patent-leather bag in his hand. The antiseptic odor which he exuded told Reese he was a doctor. The other man was a tall, buck-toothed fellow with sunken cheeks and round, glaring black eyes.

Blaine Bowman grabbed the doctor's arm with an anxious hand, pausing only to introduce the newcomers to Steve Reese as Doctor Phil Norton, Sheriff Adam Faith, and Lawyer Sid Topper.

"Reese will answer your questions, Sheriff," he said, and then rushed Doc Norton toward Min Bowman's room without giving him time to nod a greeting.

The frail lawman flopped down in a chair and Sid Topper took out a cigar and rolled it thoughfully around between his thick lips while he regarded the dark-haired field chief expectantly.

"Well?" Adam Faith said impatiently.

"I reckon there's a lot you ought to know about tonight," Reese began evenly. Still clinging to the drawling vernacular of the range, the dark-haired field chief told Sheriff Adam Faith of his own arrival in Comanche Valley, of the hanging he had prevented, and all that Bowman had explained about the raid on the B Bar B ranchhouse.

THE expression on Sid Topper's emaciated face did not change, but Adam Faith seemed upset by the cowardly wounding of Min Bowman and the appearance of hooded riders in the valley. He said nothing to Reese for a while, and sat staring vacantly into space. It was some time before he realized Reese had not completed the account, and he returned to his first question about the broken window and the scuffle he had heard in the house before he entered.

When Reese told him of Charlie Claw's demands, Adam Faith's long face paled, and his sad blue eyes appeared to sink deeper into his skull.

Noticing the evidence of strong emotion in the man, Reese said: "You've met this Charlie Claw before, sheriff?"

Adam Faith stood up, his thin lips curling away from his stubby teeth. "Nobody knows the faces of the Curly Bill gang, but I know their names and reputations. I aim to clean 'em out of this valley if it's the last thing I do. That goes for anybody I find associatin' with 'em, too.

"I want Charlie Claw—dead or alive. This is a new charge against him, breakin' and enterin' and threatenin' a man's life. You understand that, Reese? Dead or alive! I'd like to deputize you to shoot him on sight if you're aimin' to stay in these parts."

Reese had misjudged Adam Faith. There was a driving, relentless power in that small frame which he had not seen at first. But the CPA man was not sure it was an admirable power, and anger sparkled briefly in his piercing eyes.

"I'm not a professional killer, Faith. I don't hunt bounties! I don't shoot any man until I have to, and then I give him a fair chance. Right now I'm more worried about Clyde and Stella Bowman. Have you seen either of them in town?"

The meekness in Adam Faith's sallow face turned to red anger at Reese's cool reply. "I'm not workin' as a personal bodyguard to Blaine Bowman's family," he snapped, heading for the door. "You'd best get some things straight around here, Reese, if yuh want to get off on the right foot. The Bowmans ain't popular in this neck of the woods—none of 'em!

"Tack Gordon's been reportin' cattle losses, too. He ain't sure where they're goin' and he seems to think Curly Bill's old gang has been reorganized. If yuh ain't willin' to help me get Charlie Claw, you'd better not meddle too much in the rest of my job!"

"Is that a warning, Faith?" Reese asked quietly.

"That's advice, mister," the sheriff replied as he went out the door, slamming it to punctuate his words.

CHAPTER V

Votes Buy a Badge

DURING the crackling exchange between Reese and the sheriff, Lawyer Sid Topper had remained a silent observer. As the door banged, sending another piece of tinkling glass to the floor from the shattered window, Sid Topper spoke quietly at Reese's elbow.

"You're thinking maybe he is mixed up in this himself," Topper commented in his smooth, throaty voice.

Reese looked hard into Topper's glaring eyes, remembering that it was he who had notified Bowman of his inheritance of Curly Bill's ranch.

"Faith doesn't seem much concerned over the fact that an innocent woman has been hit by drygulcher's lead, that a man's life has been threatened, his cattle stolen and his son and niece swallowed up into thin air. Right now, Topper, I'm thinkin' he ain't much of a sheriff!"

Sid Topper sucked on his glowing

cigar, the effort drawing his thin cheeks almost together. "You're wrong. For ten years he's been a good lawman for Comanche Valley. Swore he'd get Curly Bill and he did. Wearing a badge is all he knows and you can't expect him to throw his job away without thinking about it."

"What's his job got to do with it?" Reese asked.

"Everything. Tack Gordon and the other ranchers elected him. Gordon hates the name of Bowman as much as Faith does. You can't expect Adam to stick his neck out too far to help Curly Bill's brother, with Gordon watching to see which way he moves in this. Adam is afraid it was the ranchers in those hoods tonight. But there's no strings on Charlie Claw. Adam swore he'd get Curly Bill and he did. He'll get Claw, too."

Disgust traced a scowling pattern along Reese's firm lips. "It seems to me, Topper, that a man's life is more important than politics. The CPA sent me here to stop Bowman's cattle losses, and that's what I'm goin' to do. Tack Gordon can like it or be hanged."

"He won't like it," the buck-toothed lawyer said quietly, staring absently at the ashes of his cigar. "That makes it dangerous for you, Reese."

The field chief's lean jaw tightened defiantly at Topper's warning, and he dismissed the subject with a shrug of his broad shoulders. He was about to ask Sid Topper about the details of Curly Bill Bowman's will, but changed his mind as Doc Norton and Blaine Bowman came down the hall.

"He says she'll live if she has plenty of rest and nothin' upsets her," Bowman told Reese. "I'm afraid she won't get it here."

Reese shook his head dubiously. "We'll do our best, but there's no use fooling ourselves, Blaine. Those gents with the hoods will come back. They're not through unless we get them first."

"If there were some place we could take her to get her out of this mess," Sid Topper said, "she'd have a better chance. Reese being here is like bait on a trap. They'll want him out of the way, too."

Blaine Bowman grunted bitterly. "Fat chance of anybody in Comanche takin' in a Bowman. That's one way to get unpopular with the big range bosses like Tack Gordon."

DUSTY TRAIL

Old Doc Norton had not spoken since he entered the room, but his mild gray eyes had been squinted in thought. Now he said, "If you'll hook up a buckboard, Bowman, and pad the bed good with blankets, I think we could move her all right. Yes, I'm sure we could."

Bowman's face looked blank. "But where?"

Doc Norton smacked his lips in decision. "To my place over on Sandy Flats. My wife can look after her and you can drop over to see her. If she gets worse, I'll come for you."

Blaine Bowman patted the old doctor's shoulders gratefully and hurried outside to prepare the wagon.

Norton's words had surprised Reese at first, but now his mouth softened in an understanding grin as he realized he should have expected this. Even on a range where lawlessness had scented the air with death, and politics had aligned unwilling converts against an innocent man, there could always be found a man untouched by the fear of retaliation.

There was a creed and an oath in old Doc Norton's heart which burned too strongly to be quenched by fear.

REESE stepped forward and laid a friendly arm across the doctor's bony shoulders. "Is there anything you want me to do, doctor?"

Doc Norton smacked his thin lips thoughtfully. "Only one thing, Reese. It may be some time before this woman regains consciousness. If things are no better here when she does, it might break the little thread of life that is holding her in this world. Now, if you've anything else to do, I think the two of us—and Topper—can handle things here all right."

There was nothing subtle about Doc Norton's warning and his sincere appeal for the CPA man to help him save his patient. Reese could not fail now. He could not have Min Bowman's death on his conscience.

"I'd planned a trip to town," Reese said. "I reckon I'll go ahead."

He started toward the door and, turning to look at Sid Topper, found the lawyer's big eyes boring into him.

"I want to talk to you again, Topper," he said.

The lawyer nodded. "About the will," he answered softly.

Without replying, Reese opened the door and went outside. As he climbed into the saddle of the waiting bay, he reflected that Sid Topper was a shrewd man. Reese wondered if he were an honest one.

Reese rode by the barn to tell Bowman he was leaving, and to inquire about the trail to town. The old rancher was almost ill with grief and despair after the ordeal of the night. Although hope for his wife had cheered him some, he was positive now that Clyde had met trouble in Comanche.

"I hope you find him," Bowman said heavily. "I don't want Min to have to wake up and learn that—" His voice trailed off as he turned to hitch the teams to a buckboard.

"I made you a promise, Bowman," Reese said solemnly.

"And I'm believin' it, Reese, as long as you're alive."

After warning the rancher to stay close to the house, and to challenge all callers with a gun, Reese rode southward, crossing the trail he had followed into the valley.

Although Reese had not yet been to Comanche, he had no trouble finding the landmarks mentioned by the rancher. He cut eastward, climbing over a cedar-dotted knoll to shorten the distance. Away from the haunting reminders of tragedy at the B Bar B, the field chief found Comanche Valley disarmingly quiet and peaceful.

From the knoll he could see miles of B Bar B range, a rolling, gullied land that piled up in increasing heights until it reached the base of the Yellowback Mountains to the west. To an experienced eye it presented a good pasture and water enough to supply a profitable herd. But it was not the best land in the valley, and as he dropped down to the plains again Reese pondered its value to Long Lem Carson or the hooded killers.

He had already decided there was more behind the outrages he had witnessed than the motives given by Blaine Bowman. The evidence of desperation and ruthlessness was too apparent, and Resse's keen mind was busy with other possibilities. Vaguely, he wondered if either Tack Gordon or the nester could have sent the masked men to the ranch that night—Carson to fulfill a vow of revenge and Gordon because of the prejudice he harbored against the very name of Bowman.

STILL wrapped in his thoughts, Reese continued eastward until he heard the roar of tumbling water. A few minutes later he came through a rocky stretch of land, and halted his pony in sight of the stream. Ahead of him he could see the silver gleam of the water where it ran off a slanting shelf of granite and dropped twenty feet to the rocky gorge, splattering and gurgling before it stretched out on the level ground and flowed southward.

Bowman had told him of these falls, and Reese knew he had only to follow the course of Comanche Creek to reach the little cowtown six miles to the south. Reese let his horse lower its head for a drink, and sat staring abstractedly at the beauty of the shimmering water, sparkling now with blue and white lights from the westering crescent moon.

After a moment, he kneed his horse around toward Comanche, thinking of Hank Ball and Dusty Trail and eager to enlist their aid. As soon as he turned his back to the falls, he heard a strange splashing, clattering sound. He whirled in the saddle, his hand streaking in-

stinctively toward his gun.

"Don't do it, Reese!" a curt voice warned, and Reese made no attempt to hide his surprise at finding lean-hipped Charlie Claw standing behind him, a rifle raised in firing position. He knew the CPA man's name, apparently having overheard the conversation at the B Bar B before he entered there. The man's clothing was spotted with water and little puddles stood in the rolled brim of his black hat; but Reese was certain the rifle was in firing order.

"I'll take my gun now, mister," Claw said, half grinning as Reese turned to face him with raised arms.

CHAPTER VI

The Bat Cage

AS HIS wide brow furrowed more with curiosity than fear, the dark-haired CPA man slid the Colt from his waistband and tossed it at Charlie Claw's feet. The youthful outlaw picked it up swiftly, relaxing his grip on the rifle as he cocked the six-gun.

"Are you part fish," Reese asked evenly, "or did you drop out of the sky?"

Charlie Claw's rich laugh had a pleasant ring to it. "There's a good dry spot behind the falls, but it's sorta messy gettin' in and out."

Reese found himself admiring the man's ability to choose a hideout. From all outward appearances, the water fell down over a solid wall, and he had not suspected a cavity beneath the ledge.

"What do you want besides the gun, Claw?"

The outlaw grinned again. "Nothin', Reese. You just happened to ride by, and I thought I might need that six-iron. I want to thank yuh, though, for not puttin' a slug in my back when I made that dive back there. You could have done it, I know."

Reese's face remained unchanged, but he was puzzled by the manner of this boyish member of the old Curly Bill gang. "I don't like to shoot a man in the back, Claw. I don't like to see a young fellow like you come out of the pen and start right out workin' for another stretch either.

"That's why I'm givin' you a little tip. Stay away from Blaine Bowman and get out of this country—fast! Sheriff Adam Faith wants you any way he can get you. And you'd better forget about Bowman. He knows nothing of Curly Bill's business."

"Thanks again, Reese," Charlie Claw drawled. "I believe you're right about Bowman, but I had to see for myself. Now I'll return your favor. Tack Gordon of the Rockin' T has a foreman called Caleb Thorn. He's fast with a gun, Reese, and he might not like yore hangin' around the B Bar B."

A sudden thought ran through Reese's mind and he peered hard at the outlaw's dark face. Much of the field chief's information came from the study of men's reactions, and he did not expect a definite answer when he asked,

"What do yuh know about this Thorn? What makes you think that?"

Charlie Claw's generous mouth drew into a tight line across his face. "I'm givin' yuh a tip, Reese—that's enough. The next time I come back to the B Bar B, it won't be with a gun in my hand. Is Stella Bowman stayin' there?"

Steve Reese had thought the conversation was over, but now he sought to learn more about the man who still held the gun trained steadily at the field chief's chest.

"You seem to know a lot about the people in Comanche Valley."

"I know Stella," Charlie Claw said huskily. "Used to carry messages to her from Curly Bill. Her old lady didn't want her to hear from her pa, so I had to sneak 'em in to El Paso. That's how the law finally nailed me. They laid for me."

For a while Reese said nothing, debating Claw's interest. At last he told the outlaw of Stella's disappearance and noted the line of worry which drew Claw's brown brows closer together. He decided Charlie Claw was more than a casual acquaintance of Stella Bowman.

He wondered if the young outlaw could have been among the hooded hangmen he had seen earlier. At the same time, the field chief found himself hoping the youngster would not participate in such a merciless plot, for he was beginning to like Charlie Claw.

After Stella Bowman was mentioned, Reese could have taken the youngster by surprise and disarmed him with ease. For Claw's mind was on other thoughts and his eyes scarcely touched the field chief. But Reese's mind was racing along other channels, and he did not want to arouse Claw's enmity by harsh treatment.

Though he was young and amiable, Reese could see in Claw a wiry strength and the studied ease of a professional gunman. Perhaps the prison term had changed him, turning his hopes toward a finer life. Reese did not want to be the first to tempt him to kill.

"Maybe you know a gent called Long Lem Carson, too," Reese suggested casually.

CLAW'S lean face hardened. "I know him. A gambler in El Paso. I always figured it was him that tipped the law before they got me. I ain't holdin' that against him now, but he's no good. He's the hombre that persuaded Curly Bill's wife to desert him. Otherwise, Rose Bowman would have inherited the B Bar B, I reckon."

Reese frowned. "Does Blaine Bowman know that?"

Charlie Claw shook his head. "I doubt it. Nobody knew what busted up Curly Bill's marriage except some of the gang that wanted to kill Carson for what he done to the boss. Long Lem Carson is the man who made an outlaw out of Curly Bill."

Ignoring the gun in the other's hand, Reese reined around and turned his back on Charlie Claw. "I reckon it's all right if I go now," he said carelessly over his shoulder.

"Just one thing, Reese," Claw called after him. "I ain't ever rustled a cow in my life. If yuh swallow any of Sheriff Adam Faith's hogwash and come lookin' for me it might hurt you and me both. There's only one way under the falls and I'll be watchin' it with a gun. I'd hate to have trouble with you."

"I'll take my chances," Reese said evenly.

He did not look back at the man, and a moment later he rounded a rough shoulder of rock and left Claw behind him. But the young outlaw had given the field chief much to think about, including a warning that a man named Caleb Thorn might try to kill him. What had Claw meant by that?

Dawn was only a few hours away when Steve Reese rode into the town of Comanche. Despite the hour, the narrow, wagon-rutted street was not entirely deserted. Light flickered dimly in the Town House Bar, a weathered, false-fronted structure in the center of town, and two tired broncs stamped their hoofs restlessly at the tie-rail.

As he rode by the saloon, the field chief glanced inside, but the two cowboys he saw engaged in conversation with the sleepy bartender were not the men he sought. Beyond the saloon, and on the other side of the street, he saw the squat adobe jail, and farther on was a long, two-story structure which he judged to be a hotel.

Deciding Hank and Dusty would have sought rest by this time, Reese clucked to the bay and made the hotel his tentative destination. But he could not get Clyde Bowman's disappearance off his mind, and when he saw Sheriff Adam Faith and two other men seated in the outer office of the jail, the CPA man stopped there first.

Leaving the bay ground-tied, Reese stepped down and walked inside. When he pushed the door open, the conversation which had been in progress inside ceased immediately, and all three men turned to look at him.

"Huh," Adam Faith grunted, recognizing the CPA man. "Yuh're losin' a lot of sleep, Reese." He turned to the two men beside him and said, "This is the gent I was tellin' yuh about. Reese, meet Abe Ware and Tack Gordon."

The field chief was glad he decided to stop. He gave Abe Ware, a tall, brown-faced man with a black, drooping mustache, only a curt nod and fixed his eyes on Tack Gordon. The Rocking T owner was a big man, heavy shouldered and showing a slight paunch. His wide, fat-wrinkled face was soft and flabby, the skin dropping away from his neck in thin jowls.

Dressed in neat moleskins and a doeskin riding jacket, Tack Gordon looked like any progressive rancher. He wore no visible weapons, but Reese's practiced eye picked out the shoulder rig beneath his coat.

Though he saw all these things in a casual glance, the object which held his open curiosity was the small wire

cage that Tack Gordon held by a leather handle in his right hand. Clinging to the mesh on one side was a single, ebony-furred bat.

"I see you stare at me like most strangers in Comanche, Reese," Tack Gordon chuckled, stepping forward to shake the field chief's hand. "Since I've turned most of the ranch duties over to my ramrod, I have to find a hobby to keep my mind from growing dull. I've been looking into the wildlife of this section. Lately, I've been riding up in the hills to snare a bat once in a while to see what I can learn of their habits. They always interested me. I came on into town tonight without dropping this little critter off at the ranch."

WHEN he had first heard of Tack Gordon, Reese had pictured in his mind a gaunt, bowlegged old plainsman with a walrus mustache and a hankering for any kind of fight. But such was not the case.

Tack Gordon was a mild-mannered, jovial man whose formal education was evident in his bearing and speech. But the thin set of his lips and the hardness of his pale eyes hinted of a harshness inside the man which his even voice could not entirely conceal.

Reese knew Gordon had been discussing conditions at the B Bar B a few minutes before, and had undoubtedly exerted his influence to prevent any aid by the sheriff. The anger still visible in Adam Faith's sad eyes indicated that it had not been a friendly discussion.

"That's interesting about the bat," Reese remarked amiably. "Some experts claim they have a homing instinct better than pigeons. You can turn one free anywhere and he'll always return to his original nesting grounds."

"Oh?" Gordon said questioningly. "I see you're well ahead of me on wildlife, Reese."

The field chief shrugged, making no mention of the college theme which had led him to dig up the information years before. "Something I read somewhere that happened to stick with me," he said.

Changing the subject, Reese turned toward Adam Faith and the business that had brought him to the jail. "I'm still lookin' for Clyde Bowman, Sheriff. Have you seen him?"

Adam Faith looked at Tack Gordon as if apologizing for his interest. "He's not in town. I checked everywhere and nobody's seen him. All I said about yore meddlin' in my job still goes, Reese."

Steve Reese hardly heard the little lawman's repeated warning. He nodded his thanks and left the building, his thoughts stirred by the meeting with Tack Gordon and the grim certainty of new trouble. Blaine Bowman had been right about his son. Clyde was in danger.

CHAPTER VII

The Listener

THE name of the hotel, Reese saw as he dismounted in front of the building, was The Bunkhouse. It was like many others he had seen in such towns as Comanche, the clapboards cracked and scaling with old paint, the windows dust-coated and with a newspaper pasted over one of them to cover the

[*Turn page*]

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sunrise design of an old bullet hole.

A narrow lobby crossed the front of the building, and a narrow, gloomy hallway led straight through to the rear entrance. At the right of both ends of the hall, a stairway led to the second floor.

As soon as he stepped inside, Reese saw the two range-dressed men who were dozing in chairs to the right of the clerk's desk. One of the loungers was a tall, stringy-muscled redhead, and the other was a stocky man, rotund, with a round, fat face. The latter was puffing sleepily on a strong-smelling cigar while he leaned back with his blue eyes half-closed.

Reese was glad to see them there, for the redhead was Hank Ball and the other man was Dusty Trail. They were field chief's capable aides.

Hank and Dusty looked up absently as Reese paused a moment in front of the door. Then they eased back in their chairs, no sign of recognition showing on their faces. But Reese knew they would be listening intently to learn the number of his room when he registered at the desk.

The clerk was a fat, bald-headed little man with rimless spectacles perched halfway down his long, needle-pointed nose, and he seemed eager to be of service as he shoved the dog-eared ledger toward the field chief.

"I hope you appreciate our accommodations more than the two gentlemen over there, Mr. Reese," the clerk said indignantly, glancing across at Hank Ball and Dusty Trail. "They claim those wooden chairs are softer than our beds."

Reese took the key from the man and looked at the soiled tag. "Number fifteen, eh?" He chuckled. "From the looks of those two gents, they wouldn't know whether a real bed went under them or over them. That's probably the trouble."

Reese headed for the dim hallway and turned up the creaking steps to the second floor. A silent smile tugged at his lips as Dusty Trail sent an angry puff of smoke floating up from his cigar, and red-headed Hank Ball glared at him in disgust.

Right now, he knew, "Doc" Reese—the nickname bestowed upon him by his trail partners because of his methodical methods of working—was the subject of many unspoken insults in the minds of his two rollicking aides.

Shortly after Reese had the smoky oil lamp lighted in his dingy room, a cautious step sounded outside his door. The faint aroma of tobacco drifted through to him, and he lifted the latch. Dusty Trail stepped inside, his cigar trailing smoke, and long-legged Hank Ball followed close behind him.

Even now there was a deceptive sleepiness about the cherub-faced Dusty. But men who had mistaken the CPA man's mild appearance for laziness had always regretted it. That which appeared as fat on Dusty's big frame was, in reality, firm layers of muscle and sinew. He was a former puncher, his range training making him light on his feet and quick as a cat.

Dusty could use his fists like a veteran pugilist, and his speed with a six-gun could have made him famous at a circus sideshow.

Hank Ball was one of the few men whom Steve Reese would have considered an equal—or an exception—to Dusty Trail. The tall redhead was inclined to be reckless, his dash and color often making him a favorite with women. But a man with Hank's skill could afford to fight with abandon. He was a polished artist with a six-gun, swift and relentless in physical combat. And beneath the handsomeness of his rugged face was a coolness which no amount of danger could change to undue excitement.

"Jumpin' Jonah, Doc!" Dusty breathed softly as he clapped Reese on the back. "What kept yuh? We was beginnin' to think the ranchers had run Blaine Bowman out on a rail and you with him!"

HANK Ball's long arm shoved Dusty aside so he could get closer to the field chief. "Ain't no secret in the delay of seein' you, yuh lard-headed galoot. I ain't exactly enjoyed inhalin' them stinkweeds yuh smoke myself!"

Dusty grabbed the waning cigar stub from his mouth and was about to unloose a salty defense when Reese stopped him. It was nothing new for him to find Hank and Dusty on the verge of warfare. Few friendly words ever passed between his trail partners, but Reese knew it was merely a show for their own amusement, and he usually enjoyed the humor of their threats.

At heart, Hank and Dusty were bosom friends, and a man who chose sides in their private argument was apt to find himself fighting both of them. At other times Reese enjoyed their boisterous antics, but now there was no time for idle banter.

"I see you've learned something about Bowman's predicament," Reese cut in.

"That was easy, Doc," Hank Ball answered, serious now. "That's all yuh can hear on the street. Bowman this, Bowman that. Can he be trusted? Will he be as hard to handle as Curly Bill?"

"Is he losin' as much cattle as that wire said, Doc?" Dusty Trail asked eagerly. "What about that crazy warnin' with the straddle bug sign?"

"That straddle bug is bad business," Reese answered. "I saw some of it myself tonight. The man's in trouble all right, and he's not like Curly Bill. He's straight if I'm any judge of men."

Talking hurriedly and quietly, Reese told his two companions what had happened at the B Bar B. Afterward, Hank and Dusty were silent for a while, rolling the facts around in their minds until they had a clear picture of the situation. Neither of them had seen a man in town answering the description of Clyde Bowman, and their faces mirrored the same concern as that felt by the field chief.

"You see what we're up against," Reese concluded worriedly. "It's goin' to be touch and go from here on out. Those hooded killers have had time to lay their plans, and now that the CPA is here they'll try their big push. That's where they're likely to show their hand, so we've got to watch it and stop it!"

Dusty Trail rolled the cigar around in his mouth and grunted angrily. "I don't like this business of women gettin' shot, even if they was aimin' somewheres else. I hate a drygulcher!" There was no humor in the chubby man's voice now, and Reese knew Dusty was rightfully angered.

"Nor hangmen that hide their faces," Hank Ball drawled grimly. "Seems to me this Long Lem Carson has got plenty of nerve settin' up that straddle bug every time he pulls a job—if he's the man behind it."

Reese looked at the tall redhead thoughtfully. "A man that has a grudge to settle likes to rub it in. But I'm not sure its Carson. Everyone in these parts probably knows about that quarrel he had with Bowman. It would be a good trick for someone to make it look like the nesters are callin' the play. There's that outlaw, Charlie Claw, to consider and Tack Gordon. Gordon's the gent that stirred up the talk you've heard against Bowman.

"It could have been a ranchers' vigilante committee in those masks. They don't like Curly Bill's brother settin' so close to their spreads. That's what we've go to find out—who's wearin' the masks and why."

DUSTY Trail looked at the glowing tip of his cigar and frowned. "Them pack trains comin' out of Mexico usually carry a small fortune in gold ingots. Curly Bill robbed one of 'em and Charlie Claw knows about it. If that's on the B Bar B, he's got a big ax to grind."

"I've thought about that," Reese answered, "but I believe Charlie Claw thinks too much of Stella Bowman to try to kill her uncle. From the look on his face when I told him she was gone, I'd say Claw and Stella are more than friends. Everybody didn't know about that robbery, and I don't believe Claw's been here long enough to back the whole show. There's something about that hombre that ain't showin'.

"That leaves Tack Gordon and Long Lem Carson with an ax to grind for other reasons. One of them might know what happened to Clyde Bowman, and we've got to find him. Worrying over that boy might mean the difference between life and death for Min Bowman."

Dusty Trail got slowly to his feet. "I reckon I know what yuh mean, Doc. I think I'll ride out toward Gordon's Rockin' T, and hit him for a job first thing in the mornin'. Hope he lets me start by catchin' up on my shut-eye."

"That leaves me the nesters," Hank Ball said dryly. He arose and shoved his gun-belt into a handy position. "But I'd rather have the clodbusters than Tack Gordon's bats. Them things give me the creeps."

Reese's two aides had not waited for any formal assignments, but they had immediately chosen the two posts Reese had planned for them. A thrill of anticipation started through Reese's bones, for he knew the three of them could

soon crowd the mysterious outlaw chieftain of Comanche Valley into a corner which could be escaped only by a showdown fight.

He could trust Hank and Dusty to hasten that event now, for they would keep a wary eye on the suspects in the conspiracy against Blaine Bowman and the B Bar B.

Halfway to the door, Hank Ball and Dusty Trail stopped in their tracks, both of them with heads cocked in a listening attitude. At the same moment, Steve Reese's head jerked erect. All of them had heard the same sound—the faint rustle of clothing and a creaking board as someone moved hastily away from the door.

CHAPTER VIII

Self-Defense

NOW signaling for silence, Reese moved on tiptoe across the room between them. He lifted the night latch carefully, his other hand gripping the handle. Then he flung the door open, and stepped outside. A puzzled frown moved over his tanned face as he looked about him. The hall was deserted, every door along the aisle closed. The lamp in Reese's room was the only light except the two swinging lanterns fastened to the ceiling to illuminate the narrow passage.

Before he turned back into his room, Reese sniffed the air suspiciously and some of the bafflement slid out of his eyes. There was a strong odor of wild lilacs in the air, and Reese knew he had not been wrong about an eavesdropper. He also had some clue to the listener's identity.

"Somebody was curious, all right," Reese mused as he looked at the expectant faces of Hank and Dusty. "Judgin' by the perfume, I'd say it was a woman. She must have darted into one of the other rooms."

Dusty chewed his cigar uneasily. "Looks like there's plenty of eyes on yuh, Doc. Watch yoreself while me'n Hank are gone, lest yuh wake up with a straddle bug for a tombstone!"

"I'll keep my eyes peeled," Reese assured him with a grin. "Now you and Hank better hit the trail. If you learn anything I'll be at the B Bar B."

"We'd better beat the sun for shore," Hank Ball drawled innocently as he followed Dusty into the hall. "It would be a shame if a bronc went trottin' into the Rockin' T with nothin' but a greasy saddle to show where Dusty use to be."

Dusty snorted disgustedly. "If yuh had enough meat on yore bones to make a shadow for me to ride in, I wouldn't have to worry, yuh lop-eared beanpole!"

The argument was still going strong, increasing in fervor as Steve Reese watched them disappear down the steps. He closed the door then, and stood by the front window until he saw Hank and Dusty separate at the hitch-rail. Dusty turned once in the saddle to shake a defiant fist at Hank Ball's long back.

Stretching his arms, Reese suddenly realized how tired he was. In another hour it would be dawn, and he had been in the saddle almost constantly since dusk the day before. He turned a yearning gaze on the sagging bed in the corner of the room, deciding to get a few hours' rest before he returned to the Bowman ranch.

Reese sat down on the edge of the bed and was reaching down to haul off his boots when he remembered that his horse was still in front of the hotel. With a sigh, he arose and started downstairs. He thought of Dusty's earnest warning and grinned.

"If he knew I was going to sleep here, I guess Dusty would have stayed and rode shotgun on my door after hearing that eavesdropper," he mused to himself.

Explaining to the sleepy-eyed clerk that he would return in a few minutes, Reese went outside and led the bay down the street. He saw the round-roofed livery stable sprawled out about a block behind the adobe jail and turned in that direction. It took him a few minutes to arouse the sleeping stable boy and make arrangement for the care of his horse. Afterward, the field chief hurried back to his room, his legs aching with fatigue.

The first warning of trouble came when Reese topped the steps and looked at the door to his room. It was open. Though he had not locked it, Reese

was positive he had pulled the door closed before he went out. A foreboding chill tightened the nerves along his spine, and he paused a moment in the hallway, his hand on his gun. Then he shrugged his shoulders and walked on. The building was of loose construction, and the long hall created a draft. The door could have been blown open by a breeze.

Nevertheless, the field chief was

HANK BALL

tensed for action when he stepped inside. Standing in the doorway, he let his eyes sweep swiftly about the faded interior. Now, more than ever, he felt unseen eyes boring into him. But he could see nothing to disturb him.

THEN suddenly Reese heard the telltale shifting of weight near him. He started to leap forward, but he was not fast enough. The open door suddenly swished toward him, the heavy panels striking his elbow and sending a numbing pain through his arm. The force of the blow knocked him against the opposite frame, blocking his attempt to draw his right-hand Colt.

Before Steve Reese could recover his balance, a shadowy, rustling form came hurtling into him. Reese caught the sparkle of a knife blade in an upraised hand. Desperately, he twisted aside and threw his arms up defensively. He got his fingers around a muscular wrist, shoved fiercely to get the knife away.

It was then that Reese got his first glimpse of the attacker Even then there was little he could see, for the man's face and shoulders were concealed by the same type of black hood that Blaine Bowman's tormentors had worn.

Locked in combat, they wrestled out to the center of the floor. Perspiration dotted Reese's face as he fought to hold the knife away. The outlaw's strength was that of two men, but the field chief was forced to match it.

Reese rammed his right hand into the man's brawny midriff, his left still clinging to the outlaw's wrist. A gusty grunt puffed from the man's covered face, but he fought back tigerishly. He kicked at Reese's legs, a spur slicing into the skin above the CPA man's boot.

The pain in his leg was nothing compared to the threat of death in the gleaming knife. The man tried to bring a knee up into Reese's groin, but the field chief hit him again in the stomach, stopping the moving leg as the man gave ground.

At that, the killer went back to his first method of attack, concentrating on the knife. His wrist twisted and shoved in Reese's grasp. The razor-sharp blade quivered an inch from the field chief's chest as their arms locked, wavering first one way and then the other. Slowly the knife lowered, and Reese knew his left hand was no match for the strength in the killer's right.

The pointed blade touched Reese's corduroy coat, and the field chief almost stopped breathing, fearing the heaving of his chest would cause the knife to bite into him. His heart pounded painfully, as if the organ itself sensed the mortal blow aimed at it.

But Reese's mind was working swiftly. Only speed and perfect coordination could save him, and the risk of freeing his grasp on the deadly weapon for even an instant was a chance he had to take.

Leaning suddenly backward at the waist to give him room to work, Reese

made his break. He brought his foot up swiftly, shoving his boot against the killer's hip. In the same movement, Reese pushed with all his might and dropped his hold on the outlaw's wrist.

The hooded man catapulted across the room in staggering backward steps, his back thumping against the opposite wall. His arm went immediately above his head, darting downward as he threw the knife. But Steve Reese had expected that, and his arms had never stopped moving. As the man went away from him, Reese's hands had sped to his guns, tugging them free in a dazzling, rotary motion.

That brief instant of freedom was all he needed. Both guns barked as one, bucking in his hands and booming like thunder in the low-ceilinged room. With the explosion, Reese dropped limply to the floor. He was just in time. The knife was already on its way, and Reese heard the swish of it above his head, the faint hum as it sank into the wall and vibrated ominously.

The hooded man stayed against the wall, pasted there by the force of the two slugs that crashed into his chest. He seemed to stand for a long time, and then he slipped lightly to the floor, the gray hood turning crimson as he died.

Before Reese could get to his feet, the hall was filled with sound. He heard the babble of excited voices debating the source of the shot. Rising quickly, the field chief tried to get the door closed, but he was too late. Four or five sleepy-eyed roomers, their clothing in disarray, glimpsed the hooded man on the floor and swept in a body toward Reese's room.

Reese shook his head resignedly and walked toward the dead man. He yanked off the black hood and stared down at a bearded, flat-nosed face, the thin lips drawn back in death. Kneeling, he ran his hands over the man's levis pockets and examined the dirty flannel shirt.

At last Reese stood up, a soiled white envelope in his hand. He glanced at it briefly, ignoring the mail-order circular inside, and stuffed it into his own pockets just as the curiosity-seekers swarmed into his room.

IGNORING the steady stream of questions from the frightened onlookers, Reese gave them little attention until the bald-headed, bespectacled clerk pushed forward to talk with him. In cryptic tones, the field chief told the man what had happened, and the clerk's eyes bulged and narrowed at alternate intervals.

"I—I went for the sheriff as soon as I heard the shot," the clerk gulped. "He—he ought to come up here. He—he ought to stay and see if there are other of these—these things with sacks over their heads."

Reese scowled as the roomers continued to crowd around him. "There won't be others," he assured the clerk. "I'm the only one that's gettin' in their craw. Now see if you can get these people out of here so I can talk with the sheriff when he comes."

The clerk nodded, pushing at his skidding spectacles. He started backing the onlookers into the hall, assuring them of safety and explaining that the sheriff would demand privacy for his investigation. Reese had scarcely looked at the others, and he breathed with relief as the crowd began to disperse. Then gradually a familiar scent came to him, and his eyes lighted. He turned to follow the movement of the crowd.

It took him a few minutes to locate the woman, for she had not entered the room. She stood just outside the door, peering uneasily over the shoulders of the spectators. The pale green robe which she had wrapped about her slim figure intensified the red of her hair, and softened the even tan of her face. She had plain, even features, but her full, curving mouth made her pretty. Even at this distance Reese could smell the lilac perfume she wore.

Remembering the furtive listener who had stood outside his door earlier, Reese followed the crowd into the hall. The woman started to back away toward the room on her left, and Reese knew now it had been simple for her to escape before he could get the door open after he had heard her footsteps. The field chief touched her arm lightly and she jerked around nervously.

"I may be wrong," Reese said quietly, "but aren't you Stella Bowman?" He looked closely at her, reviewing the description Blaine Bowman had given of the missing girl.

The red-haired woman's green eyes dilated sharply, and she opened her mouth as if to speak. The first reaction

was replaced by a strange hardness in her face, and her voice was cooly aloof when she spoke. With a sinking sensation, Reese realized he had made a mistake. Now he could see the faint wrinkles in the woman's broad forehead, and the mature lines around her eyes. She was much older than he had suspected.

"That's a poor way to make an acquaintance, cowboy," she said haughtily. "My name is Faye Smith. Mrs. Faye Smith."

Mumbling an apology, Reese walked away with his face burning from the woman's sarcasm. But he had been wrong about only one thing—her identity. He was positive Faye Smith had been the eavesdropper he and his partners had heard, and he wondered why the woman had been interested in their conversation. Could it have been possible that she had sent the killer to his room? Few people had known he was there. The sheriff and Tack Gordon might have seen him enter, but Reese was puzzled over the attack on his life.

He shuddered as he reflected on how the killing had been planned. No disturbance had been desired—only a corpse to be found in the room at daybreak, the victim of silent and unsolved death.

"If—if there's no further need of me," the bald-headed clerk said when Reese returned to the room, "I'll get on back to the desk. The sheriff should be here."

Reese nodded and the man hurried away, casting a final fearful look at the blood-smeared body on the floor before he closed the door and went out.

The clerk's footsteps had hardly died on the stairs when Reese heard others. A moment later Sheriff Adam Faith pushed the door open and walked inside, followed by Tack Gordon. The big flabby-faced rancher still had the bat cage in his hand, and Reese thought how fitting it was that the hideous little mammal should appear there in a room with death.

Adam Faith walked straight to the killer's body, glancing absently at the hood beside him, and then at the man's cruel face. He looked up at Reese, his sad eyes unchanged.

"You're bringin' me trouble, Reese," he grunted. "First killin' in town in months. Stranger, too. Give me yore story. He won't be tellin' his."

CHAPTER IX

Bribe

EVERY bit of the evidence was there in the dingy little room, and any man with experience could have read the story of the fight. Sheriff Adam Faith could read it, too, but he was distrustful of Reese and would seize on any clue to discredit him.

The field chief gestured over his shoulder, indicating the knife which was still imbedded in the wall.

"I don't like those things," he said coldly. "I get fightin' mad every time a man tries to stick one in me." In the same clipped voice, Reese told the sheriff every detail of the battle.

Adam Faith nodded. "Self-defense, then. One of them hooded hellions, but new to me. You ever see him, Tack?"

Tack Gordon stepped closer to the body, his eyes boring into the silent face. "Can't say that I have, Adam. I know most everybody in Comanche Valley, too."

Unknown to either of the others, their words were what Reese had wanted to hear. His keen mind had been busy throughout the entire disturbance, flitting over many subjects and possibilities. Vague suspicions had been growing there and now they were intensified.

The fact that the man was neither a rancher nor a nester strengthened Reese's contention that there was something bigger than vengeance or prejudice behind the persecution of Blaine Bowman. By the same token, it was confusing. If the men who had tried to hang Blaine Bowman were neither of the suspected factions, who were they?

While Tack Gordon looked at the corpse, Reese also dropped his eyes for another swift inspection. The action was justified, for he made a discovery which had escaped him before. His hard black eyes lingered thoughtfully on the peculiar grayish matter that clung to the instep of the killer's high-heel boots.

After hearing Gordon and Faith deny

any acquaintance with the man, Reese withdrew the letter which he had taken from the outlaw's pocket and handed it to the sheriff.

"Maybe this will help," he said quietly. "The name of the addressee is Jed Weston of Lizard Well. Ever hear that name?"

Sheriff Adam Faith's long face lengthened in surprise as he looked at the envelope. "It's a familiar name on reward dodgers of a few years back. This gent yuh shot was one of Curly Bill's boys! Yuh've done Comanche Valley a favor, Reese. Thanks!"

"U-huh," Tack Gordon grunted. "Like I've suspected. Blaine Bowman's gathering them in, getting ready to take things over."

Reese raised his eyes quickly to the rancher's loose-jowled face, and found Tack Gordon watching him through narrowed, calculating eyes. Gordon was unrelenting in the whisper campaign he had started against the owner of the B Bar B, and Reese recognized the hint that the CPA was on the wrong side of the fight.

"Gents," the field chief said pointedly, "I'm beginnin' to feel a mite tuckered out. I'll help you carry the corpse over to the undertaker, Sheriff, and then I'd like to turn in."

Adam Faith looked at him as if he were insulted. "No help needed, Reese."

The frail lawman bent down then, picking up the discarded hood and sliding his hands under the dead man's back. He straightened easily, slinging the body across one slim shoulder as he would carry a sack of oats, and walked outside and on down the steps.

"Comin', Tack?"

"I've got to be riding home," Tack Gordon called after him. "Just want to say goodnight to Reese."

As soon as the sheriff was out of sight, Steve Reese walked over and closed the door. His deliberate movements gave no hint of the curiosity that was eating at him, for he had not been deceived by Tack Gordon's decision to stay after the sheriff was gone. He dropped the night latch in place, and turned to face the big slate-eyed rancher who had sat down on the edge of the bed.

With his back against the door, Reese took up tobacco and papers and twisted up a quirly. He lighted the cigarette and let the smoke drift out through his nostrils while he studied Tack Gordon.

"What's your deal, Gordon?" he asked calmly. "I know you've got one in mind."

GORDON made no attempt to prolong the good humor with which he had first impressed the CPA man. His voice was taut and grim, his eyes narrowed to pinpoints.

"I expected you to open up like that, Reese," he said. "It's typical of you. You can drop that drawl and be yourself with me. I know you're not the forty-a-month puncher that men like Adam Faith take you to be. There's culture and college degrees in your background, Reese, and it shows through to a man familiar with such things."

"The deal, Gordon," Reese reminded casually, his voice unchanged.

A tight grin pulled at Gordon's lips, fading as he continued. "I'll lay my cards on the table, Reese. Curly Bill Bowman rustled my stock and picked off my payroll riders for years. I don't aim to go through that again—can't afford to risk a neighbor that has such things in his blood. I'd be just as happy if Long Lem Carson and his nesters could run Blaine Bowman out of Comanche. You're in their way—and my way!"

"So you want me to pull out," Reese guessed softly.

"I'll give you five hundred dollars to get out of Comanche tomorrow. That's better than staying here—permanently."

Reese moved away from the door and stood squarely in front of the man. "You can't buy me, Gordon," he snapped. "Colonel Beauvine sent me here to do a job. I aim to do it, or die trying!" He had not missed the open threat in Gordon's offer and it angered him.

At Reese's defiant answer, Gordon leaped to his feet, his sudden move hardly shaking the tenacious grip of the silent bat on the wire mesh.

"There's more than an off-hand chance you might do the latter, Reese!" Gordon retorted, striding angrily toward the door.

As he started out, Tack Gordon stopped and faced Reese again. The anger which had turned his flabby face a blue-gray color a moment before had subsided as quickly as it had come.

"There's one other way that might

keep you and me from coming to a showdown, Reese," he said matter-of-factly. "You might tell Blaine Bowman that I'll buy him out—at my price. That would solve our problem."

Without waiting for Reese's answer, Tack Gordon tipped his hat lightly and left the room, pulling the door shut behind him. His departure left a straining stillness in the room, for Steve Reese stood motionless for a long time, frozen in thought. He pondered the spiteful prejudice lodged in Tack Gordon. Would a man resort to murder to rid the range of an outlaw's brother?

That was only one of the many questions that appeared in the field chief's mind, camouflaging the real leader of the plot against Blaine Bowman. Among the disconcerting factors of the case were Charlie Claw and the strange woman who had spied on Reese's room. What had happened to Clyde Bowman, and why had Stella acted so queerly, and then disappeared when she believed Min Bowman had been killed?

For a moment Reese felt a rare wave of hopelessness surge through him. Since arriving in Comanche Valley he had accomplished little, and the danger to himself and his aides was increasing every minute. The attack by the hooded killer was evidence that Reese was a marked man now, and they would try again. But as the field chief continued to pursue the many angles of the case, a single suspect emerged from the confusion. Suddenly, he realized the events of the night had not placed him entirely on the defensive.

A grim smile played around the CPA man's firm lips as he undressed and went to bed, a six-gun within reach under his pillow. The hooded man who had come to kill Steve Reese had, instead, left the alert field chief with a clue that might eventually place a noose around the wily boss of the Comanche Valley outlaw conspiracy.

As his eyes became heavy with sleep, Reese's last thought was of Clyde Bowman and the search he would make for him in the morning. He believed he knew where to find him now.

ANOTHER STEVE REESE NOVEL

The Herd From Nowhere

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

COMING NEXT ISSUE!

CHAPTER X

The Will

UNCOMFORTABLY, the dry stifling heat of the Border country turned the little hotel room into a warming oven. Steve Reese tossed uncomfortably on the lumpy mattress and sat up, perspiration running from his brow. The CPA man had slept without interruption since Tack Gordon left him at dawn, exhaustion compensating for his discomfort.

The heat and the strong light against the outer windows told him it was nearly noon, and Reese arose quickly. He poured tepid water from the dented metal pitcher and sponged the sweat and dust from his body.

Feeling refreshed, Reese dressed and went downstairs. There was another clerk at the desk now, and Reese paid his bill without comment. Afterward, he went outside and stood a moment in the glaring sunlight, searching the faded signs along the drab street for a place to eat.

Before he stepped off into the powdery dust and headed for the tiny cubbyhole restaurant he had spotted down the street, he glanced carelessly back at the hotel lobby. What he saw there held his eyes for a minute, and brought the thoughtful scowl between his dark brows

Faye Smith, the red-haired woman with the lilac perfume, had just come into the lobby from some other entrance and was talking earnestly with Long Lem Carson. The pale, intent expression was still on her face, and she was gesturing nervously as she looked up at the tall nester.

Carson's head was slightly bent toward her, and his face was solemn and hard. Reese could not hear their voices, but he judged by the curl of Carson's wide lips while he talked, that he was arguing with the woman.

Turing away before they saw him, Reese went on down the street. When he was almost to the cafe, the field chief saw Carson come out of the ho-

tel, mount his horse and ride out of the other end of town. He was beginning to understand Mrs. Faye Smith, now. He would have given many good pesos to have known the subject of their discussion.

The cafe was dingy and dusty and hot like the rest of Comanche. It was an odd hour of the day, when most of the ranchers and cowboys were at work, and Reese drew little attention from the town loungers while he ate. Still dressed in cowboy levis and flannel shirt, and carrying the corduroy coat over his arm, Reese looked like any other wandering rider.

Only the arresting black eyes and the businesslike way in which he wore his matched .38s invited speculation. He heard no mention of the killing at the hotel, and judged that the subject had been exhausted before he awoke.

Eager to reach the B Bar B, Reese wolfed the greasy bacon and eggs, paused long enough to drink an extra cup of coffee, and then hurried to the livery stable to get his horse.

Familiar with the trail now, he traveled swiftly. After a night's rest, the broad-chested bay was full of spirit, responding to every touch of spur and rein. Reese did not follow the winding course of Comanche Creek, but took a more direct route, climbing in a beeline across shaly ridges, battling steadily through cactus-crowded coulees.

Riding this route, he missed the waterfall, but his mind went that way when he neared the vicinity of the hollow ledge. It was a hideout that Sheriff Adam Faith would have a difficult time finding in his search for Charlie Claw. Unless the young outlaw proved to be more dangerous than Reese now believed him to be, the field chief had no intention of divulging his whereabouts.

It was mid-afternoon when Reese rounded the base of the ridge and galloped up the pine-lined lane to the B Bar B ranch house. By the time he was out of the saddle, Blaine Bowman was there to meet him, his fluffy gray hair uncovered to the light of the sun. There seemed to be a sallowness under the deep tan of the hefty rancher's face now, and his watery blue eyes had sunk deeper beside his prominent nose. Years of age had crept into his steps overnight, and Reese knew he had heard nothing from Clyde or Stella.

"I was beginnin' to worry about yuh, son," Bowman said, trying vainly to lighten his tired voice. "Glad you showed up before I left. I was fixin' to ride over to Doc's place to see Min."

"How is she?" Reese asked anxiously, stepping down beside the man. "Does she know about Clyde?"

BOWMAN shook his head. "I lied to her, had to do it. She was conscious for a while this mornin', but mighty poorly. I was afraid to tell her the truth. When he don't go see her, though, she's goin' to know the truth. She thinks he's here, but too busy on the range to get time to ride over to Sandy Flats."

The rancher stared at the ground, lost in his own thoughts. Finally, he looked hopefully at Steve Reese. "Did yuh learn anything in town that might help?"

"Mebbe," Reese replied quietly. He told Bowman of the attack by the hooded outlaw, and of Tack Gordon's offer to buy the ranch.

The old rancher's face hardened, and Reese knew the man's grief had strengthened him, a common reaction of the stout-hearted.

"Gordon will never get this spread for the measly pocket change he'd be willin' to offer," he said. "I ain't leavin' the B Bar B until I get my hands on the snake that shot my wife and done away with Clyde. What do you make of this thing, Reese?"

Reese kicked at a pebble, his face thoughtful. "I think there's goin' to be some lead flyin' before long, Bowman. The men that have been doin' the actual dirty work ain't ranchers or nesters. They're the remains of Curly Bill's gang. They're flockin' back to this territory for some reason. Findin' the brains behind them—their new boss—is goin' to be our big problem. It could be Long Lem Carson, or anybody else that wanted the B Bar B enough to pay them gun wages to run you off."

"If I didn't aim to keep this ranch," Bowman said slowly, "I'd almost enjoy seein' Tack Gordon and Long Lem Carson fight to see who was goin' to get the most out of my leavin'. I ain't worried much about Gordon. All I've got to do is stick out his threats until he's convinced I ain't an owlhooter like my

brother. But Long Lem is another question. The only way to handle that goose-necked coyote is with a six-gun!"

While Blaine Bowman continued to rain curses on the tall nester, Reese's mind wandered along other channels and he did not interrupt. It would do the old rancher good to arouse sufficient ire against his enemies to allay some of the worry that pressed his mind.

As the rancher's anger cooled, Reese urged him to proceed with his planned visit with his wife.

"I've got a little ridin' to do anyway," Reese explained, but, to keep from arousing any false hope in the man, did not add that his ride might lead to the solution of Clyde Bowman's disappearance.

Without saying more, Reese swung back into the saddle and started to ride away, but Bowman stopped him with a wave of his hand. The rancher fumbled in his moleskins and withdrew a folded sheet of paper.

"Sid Topper was over to see Min this mornin' and left this copy of Curly Bill's will for you. Wanted me to be shore it got to you."

The CPA man shifted in the saddle and grinned at the memory of the wise old lawyer. "Have you read that will carefully, Blaine. Today, I mean?"

"Yeah," Bowman replied. "It's just like it was the first time I saw it. Why?"

"In my business," Reese said, "you suspect every stranger until he proves his worth. Is there anything in that will that might indicate that part of it is missing, that there might have been another clause pointing out that there was thirty thousand dollars in government gold hidden somewhere on the B Bar B?"

For a moment Blaine Bowman was silent, his eyes showing his appreciation of Steve Reese's shrewd reasoning. But afterward he shook his head emphatically, pocketing the paper when he saw that Reese was not going to take it from him.

"Sid would never hold out on me," Bowman declared confidently. "This will is just like it was delivered to him. I'm sure of that."

"I guess you're right," Reese agreed, wheeling the bay. "Ill see you later, Blaine."

At the end of the lane below the B Bar B, Reese set his horse into a mile-eating gallop and put the house quickly behind him. He did not bother to look for a trail this time, for it was a territory that he had not yet explored, and he did not want to delay any longer.

HIS ride to the ranch had consumed precious minutes, but he wanted to be sure Clyde Bowman had not yet returned. For seeking the youngster in the rock-crested slopes of the Yellowback Mountains toward which he now rode was a task that Reese felt impelled to attempt, but one that he did not relish. He had no idea how many unseen eyes might be watching his approach from the craggy ridges, or how many hair-trigger guns would be trained on his chest as he rode.

Busy anticipating the value of Clyde Bowman as a witness in solving the mysterious reign of death and terror which gripped Comanche Valley, Reese did not dwell long on the personal risk of his mission. He came out of the rolling land of the B Bar B headquarters onto a slanting plain, urging his mount into a lope while he kept his eyes on the rough mountain range four or five

[Turn page]

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miles westward.

The Yellowbacks were little more than enormous ledges of cream-colored rocks piled one on the other. Here and there a starved cedar or a scraggly oak jabbed upward, resembling the fingers of a skeleton lifted toward the sky.

But Reese gave little attention to the scant vegetation. The thing which interested him most was the scattered black dots that appeared on the steep slopes. He had not noticed them when he first rode into Comanche Valley, recognizing the discoloration as gaping holes in the barren surface. Then he had not thought he would be riding up there to explore the mysterious cave depths at such an early date.

Despite his interest in the hills beyond, Reese was still alert to the things about him. It was not easy to forget the narrow escape of the knife attack, and he was constantly on guard. When he passed over the plain and dropped down into a lava-crusted draw, an immediate alarm plucked at his nerves. Slowing the bay, he listened intently for a moment, catching the sound that had disturbed him. The metallic ring was muffled in the brush behind him, but Reese knew what it was. A shod hoof striking a stone. He was being followed!

The field chief moved cautiously onward as the sound came closer. At a turn in the draw, Reese dismounted and led the bay into a cluster of brush. Then he drew his gun and waited, his eyes trained on the bend. Hoofs rattled closer and Reese tensed, rolling the gun hammer back under his thumb. A horse's head jutted around the turn, and then the stalker swung clearly into view. Still holding the gun, Reese stepped calmly into the open.

"Over here, Dusty," he called, breathing easier as he recognized the familiar figure of his chubby assistant.

Dusty Trail, a black cigar clenched in his teeth, jerked around in the saddle, a six-gun appearing magically in his fat fist. Reese grinned admiringly at the rolypoly man's uncanny speed, and then Dusty's face relaxed in a wide grin.

"Dad-blast it, Doc," Dusty groaned, "yuh hadn't ought to do me that way. I was already gettin' plumb jumpy when I rounded the turn and saw you'd disappeared." Dusty explained quickly that he had been on his way to the B Bar B when he saw Reese crossing the plain. In order to overtake him, Dusty had cut cross-country to meet him in the draw.

"What's up, Dusty?" Reese asked quickly, mounting the bay and returning to the trail while they talked. "Learn anything at the Rockin' T?"

The increased vigor with which Dusty Trail attacked his forgotten stogie indicated the excitement which he had held in leash until now.

"They're after yuh, Doc," Dusty declared uneasily. "The whole Rockin' T gun crew is tryin' to cut yore sign!"

CHAPTER XI

Gun-War

BETWEEN puffs on the ever-present cigar, Dusty explained fully his reason for coming to see Reese. The rolypoly aide had decided to assume the role of a professional gunman after looking over the rough crew which rode the Rocking T range. Dropping several vague hints of nefarious operations along the Brazos, and giving the foreman a demonstration of his ability to handle a gun, Dusty had experienced no trouble in obtaining a job.

"Caleb Thorn signed me on," Dusty said. "That hombre must be all that Charlie Claw told you he was. He's a mean-lookin' cuss with shoulders like a bull and slick hair parted down the middle and stickin' out over his ears like a buzzard's wing. Wonder where Claw met up with him."

"I asked Claw about that," Reese said, "and didn't get much of an answer. Even the worst killers and crooks observe one code, Dusty, and Claw's actions got me to thinkin'. I've seen owlhooters go straight, start wearin' a badge, but refuse to make a move against their old gang until they had time to change hideouts and all the advance plans he knew about.

"All that makes me think Charlie Claw and Caleb Thorn are from the same outfit—Curly Bill's gang. Otherwise, I believe he would have told me

more about Thorn."

Dusty Trail's mouth dropped open, and he eyed the field chief perplexedly. "Why don't I figger them things out, Doc? You get yore answers in the dangedest ways, and it beats me how they usually turn out to be right! But what about Tack Gordon? He's raisin' Cain 'cause he's afraid Blaine Bowman will make this an outlaw range, and he's got one of the old gang for a ramrod. Yuh think he's that dumb, Doc?"

"You tell me, Dusty," Reese answered evenly. "Why has the Rocking T declared gun-war on the CPA?"

"I'm comin' to that, Doc," Dusty went on hurriedly, giving up his attempt to follow the field chief's line of reasoning. "Tack Gordon didn't show up at the ranch until daylight this mornin'. Soon as he got there things started happenin'. Caleb Thorn almost went wild when Gordon told him one of Curly Bill's gang was runnin' loose in Comanche. It was plain Thorn knowed Charlie Claw and was either afraid of him or hated the sight of him.

"Gordon acted the same way, sayin' he wasn't goin' to be robbed by no more of that outfit. He sent all his men scourin' the range for Claw except me'n Thorn. He don't trust me yet, so he give instructions to the crew that went after Claw out of my hearin'. He made me a cook and told me to stay put, but I sneaked off."

"And he saved Thorn for me," Reese ventured quietly.

"Yeah," Dusty replied, his blue eyes squinting grimly. "Gordon told Thorn he'd give him two hundred dollars if he could bluff you out of Comanche. He says if you stay, Bowman will stay. He's determined to run the B Bar B owner out. If Thorn can't bluff yuh out, the offer stands good to the whole crew!"

Reese chuckled as Dusty paused to flick ashes from the cigar. "Take it easy, Dusty. You'll have your fun. You know I can't be bluffed."

Dusty snorted disagreement and bit into the stogie again. "It ain't goin' to be no bluff, Doc! I heard Thorn tell the others not to hope to collect that dinero. He aims to get yuh with a gun, Doc, and he's fast as a lightnin' bolt!"

Reese's face sobered as he realized the seriousness of Dusty's report. "It looks like Tack Gordon meant what he said when he made me that offer," he said with a frown. He told Dusty then of the incident in his hotel room the night before, and of Tack Gordon's visit after the fight was over.

CONCERN pulled a heavy scowl over the stocky waddy's face, and Dusty turned quizzical eyes on the field chief. "Then it looks like Gordon might be our man, Doc. But it don't make sense. Why would Gordon hate Blaine Bowman so if he was bossin' the outlaws hisself. I thought that was what he was usin' as an excuse for wantin' to get rid of Bowman."

Steve Reese turned his eyes again to the mountains beyond. "Clyde Bowman can answer a lot of those questions, Dusty. We've got to find him if he's alive! You get on back to the Rockin' T and keep your eyes on Gordon. Later I want you to ride over to the nester camp and get Hank, and meet me at the Bowman ranch tonight. As soon as I find Clyde Bowman, I'm forcin' a showdown. It's too risky while they still hold him, but I have a fairly good idea where he is and who put him there."

Dusty Trail saw the anger mounting in Steve Reese's black eyes, and saw the hardening line of the field chief's square jaw. They were signals he had seen before, and he sensed danger and excitement ahead. His own craving for action made him reluctant to leave, but Reese's insistence could not be denied.

"Do as I say, Dusty," the field chief ordered quietly. "There are so many things we don't know yet, we can't afford to miss a single bet."

At last Dusty nodded, nudging his horse back down the trail. "You're in a risky spot, Doc," he warned over his shoulder. "Yuh can't tell where them Rockin' T gun wolves are by now."

As soon as Dusty Trail's broad back disappeared around the bend in the draw, Steve Reese spurred swiftly on his way. The sun was traveling rapidly across the sloping sky, burning against his back in unrelenting fury. Shimmering heat waves danced in the rocks and brush about him. But Reese did not mind the drops of perspiration that rolled from his hat brim as much as he might have at some other time. At present the sun was his ally, and he lengthened the bay's lope in the hope of reaching the caves above him before dark.

Half an hour after he left Dusty, Reese came out of the twisting draw into a wasteland of ugly black rocks and shifting, hoof-dragging brown sand. For a mile in front of him there was nothing but misshapen spires of rock and lava, as gray as death and as grotesque as ghosts.

But it was the doorway to the Yellowbacks and he knew another hour would put him on the ledges below the honeycomb caves that were his destination. The mountains reared up ahead of him, full-blown and jagged like the sails of a ship.

Before he entered the intricate maze of the badlands, he paused at a little spring he found seeping out from the rocks at the edge of the draw. He was surprised to find a hoof-marked trail passing close to the water hole, and for a moment he reflected on the map of the Comanche territory which he had studied before leaving Austin. After orienting himself, he knew the trail led to the nester camp beyond the low-lying ridge north of him. South of him was the Rocking T Ranch, and behind him was the B Bar B.

While the horse drank from the brackish pond, Reese took time to check the loads in the twin .38 Colts that rode low on his thighs. He loosened the guns in their casings, twirled the cylinders of each to dislodge any dust in the mechanism, and then dropped them lightly back in place.

There was nothing around him but a heat-buzzing silence; still the stifling air seemed charged with an electric tenseness. Somewhere ahead of Reese lurked danger and mystery—men who hid their faces in shielding hoods and left a straddle bug mark where their victims died. Reese had seen a sample of their grim work when he rescued Blaine Bowman from a hangnoose, and the old rancher had told him of others.

Bowman had found the nester symbol anchored on the ground beside two back-shot cowboys a month ago. Not until the killer had attacked him in the hotel room did Reese know where to look for their hidden lair. But now he was positive they were in the caves and that Clyde Bowman was either a prisoner or had died at their hands.

FOREBODING rode the saddle with the dark-haired field chief as he pulled away from the water hole and plunged into the rocks. Had Reese known what awaited him there, he would never have replaced his guns. For he rounded a jagged granite heap a moment later and rode straight into the face of grinning death!

Reese did not have to touch the reins, for the sudden appearance of the man in the center of the trail stopped the bay. The CPA man sat the saddle as still as a rock, his eyes set warily on the man.

The stranger's size and posture sent an immediate thought through the field chief's mind. For, even without the concealing hood as a reminder, he knew this was the leader of the killers who had tried to hang Blaine Bowman. And the spreading shoulders and leering inward curve of his apelike face was the same as Dusty had described. It was Caleb Thorn!

The instant the man stepped into view, Reese felt the dreadful hand of doom rapping at him. For Caleb Thorn had a six-gun in each hand, and his fingers were locked on the triggers.

Thoughts tumbled through Reese's mind one upon the other, but he found no hope of escape. At such a disadvantage, there was no time to draw and shoot. Thorn did not mean to give him that opportunity. He meant to shoot him down.

Instead of reaching for his guns, Reese kicked his feet from the stirrups and dived for the ground. While he was still in the air, one of Caleb Thorn's guns roared lead and flame. A stunning shock knocked at Reese's skull, a jarring, shaking sensation that pounded consciousness out of him. He struck the ground without knowing it, rolled down a trough between the rocks and lay still with blood covering the side of his face.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

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Bushwhack Boomerang

An Action Novelet

By LEE BOND

AND OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER XII

Hank Ball's Mistake

RED-HEADED Hank Ball, upon leaving Steve Reese at the hotel, wasted little time in getting to the nester camp. Like Reese, Hank had studied a map of the territory before leaving C P A headquarters and he soon located the trail that led him across the ridge north of the badlands.

He rode into the nester settlement just at sunrise, a lanky, sun-bronzed man with low-slung six-guns and a friendly grin on his boyish face. But beneath the redhead's bland smile was a seething anger, created by the things he had heard while in town and by the facts supplied by Steve Reese. He was puzzled and somewhat fascinated by the mysterious straddle bugs which had come to mean disaster at the B Bar B, and he was eager to observe the behavior of Long Lem Carson.

Posing as a wandering cowboy down on his luck, Hank talked first with a scrawny, long-armed little man called Chester Martin. He told Martin he was merely looking for a bed and a meal and a place to recover from his disappointments of the cattle business. He volunteered to repair harness and do odd jobs in exchange for a bunk, openly admitting that he knew nothing of farming.

Martin was dubious at first, remembering that five years before it was cowboys such as Hank who had tried to prevent the homesteaders from claiming the unused land beyond the ridge. After listening to Hank's persuasive humor for a while, however, Martin relented. The farmer assigned the redhead a few menial chores, and then walked away behind a bull-tongue plow and went to work in the fields farther down the little valley.

Aside from a few women and several dirty-faced kids, the settlement was deserted by ten o'clock. Hank watched the men carefully as they trickled out to tend their crops, but he saw no sign of Long Lem Carson. Once he heard a passing farmer mention the tall man's name and caught the reply made by his companion.

The farmer pointed up a brush-clogged hollow and said, "That Carson's a peculiar duck. Comin' in here and buildin' a cabin a mile away from the rest of us. Stuck off in Wildcat Holler like he's better'n the rest of us. Pays to watch a man like that, when he don't offer to hunt no land for crops."

After the men had gone, Hank puttered around with a set of broken check lines which Martin had left for him to repair. While he worked, his sharp green eyes peered anxiously in the direction of Wildcat Hollow. Reese had been right about Carson's pretense. The man was here for some reason other than farming.

As soon as he was sure the farmers were not coming in for the noon meal, Hank Ball ate the cold beans Martin had left for him in the kitchen of the little two-room log shack, and went out to the corral where he had left his horse. A few minutes later the tall redhead was riding swiftly toward Wildcat Hollow.

Hank's first intention was to take a look around Long Lem Carson's cabin. But when he came to the edge of the little slant-walled gorge, the red-headed CPA man changed his mind. He pulled his horse to a halt and studied the ground about him thoughtfully.

The mouth of Wildcat Hollow opened to the east, and Hank knew a man could approach it from the B Bar B without being seen from the nester camp. That, and the appearance of the trail, gave Hank Ball a hunch that set his blood pounding. To a man who had ridden range, the sign in the hollow gave birth to a ready observation. A large herd of cattle had passed this way once. The sign was old, and that made Hank even more suspicious. He had seen little livestock at the nester camp, and that had been horses and sharp-boned dairy cows. All of them combined could not have left this much evidence of their passing.

His green eyes narrowed hopefully, Hank spurred into the hollow. He had gone only a short distance when the trail swerved westward and crossed the gentle slope, heading deeper into the rough land north of the settlement. Beyond the slope, Hank dropped down into an eroded, rock-strewn region that

was cut by canyons and draws.

In the middle of the afternoon, Hank's listening ears were rewarded by the melancholy lowing of cattle. Riding faster now, the redhead turned into a deep canyon and came abruptly upon the herd. The canyon ended a short distance ahead, blocked by an orange-streaked wall of solid rock. A brush fence closed the gorge in front of Hank, keeping the cattle penned without benefit of a single guard.

Hot anger touched Hanks face as he looked at their wasted, bony frames—half-starved by the lack of sufficient grass. Then a thrill of triumph went through him as he saw the brand burned into their hides. They were B Bar B cattle, the stock Blaine Bowman had lost soon after he received a warning to leave Comanche Valley!

"You've just made the biggest mistake of your life, cowboy!"

LOST in his own thoughts, Hank Ball had heard no sound behind him. But now he jumped at the tone of the icy voice cutting at his back. He turned quickly, gazing in surprise at the tall, overalled figure behind him. Long Lem Carson stood there with a six-gun clutched menacingly in his hand, his lips drawn in a harsh line across his slim, pointed face!

"Get your hands up, redhead, and don't get jumpy about them guns," Carson warned as Hank's fingers twitched anxiously.

Carson moved forward, sidling around to get in front of the tall CPA man. A sparkling light danced in Hank Ball's green eyes as Long Lem Carson came closer. The recklessness which had astounded other deadly opponents surged through the lanky redhead, and a cool, deceptive grin quirked Hank's generous mouth. Carson opened his mouth to give another command, but the words never passed his lips.

Hank Ball came out of the saddle like a springing lion, his long arms outstretched in a daring dive. Carson's gun barked wickedly, and Hank heard the slug whistle under him. Before the tall nester could pull the trigger again, Hank landed on top of him, his weight smashing the man down.

But Long Lem Carson was tough and wiry and desperate. He twisted aside as Hank struck, taking only a part of the redhead's weight. Both of them went down amid the cutting rocks, grunting from the impact. They rolled apart and came to their feet at the same time. Carson still clung to the gun, and Hank Ball waded in before he had a chance to use it.

Hank's long arm lashed out, crushing Carson's delicate nose and drawing blood. Carson staggered back, Hank charging in relentlessly. He tried to hit the nester again, but Long Lem ducked his head to one side and the blow missed.

Then Carson came back at him like an enraged grizzly. He was too crowded to use the six-gun, so he fought as Hank did. He ducked his long back, shoving a wide shoulder into Hank's middle and driving him backward. Hank's boots skidded helplessly on the rolling rocks and he went down, his legs doubling beneath him. He never got up.

In a single swift stride, Long Lem was beside him, the Colt slashing down. Hank tried to twist his head aside, but the impact came just the same, hard and crunchy against his skull.

He was first aware that he was out of the rocks, and that a hard-packed earthen floor was beneath him. It took him a few seconds of thought to account for the throbbing, nauseating ache in his head, and then Hank remembered everything. He opened his eyes, staring at the hewn rafters above him. He knew then that he was in Long Lem Carson's cabin.

His thoughts still hazy from the blow on his head, Hank tried to reach up and touch the lump above his right ear. His lips twisted wryly at the foolish impulse. His arms and legs were tightly bound, the circulation already slowed to a numbing crawl through his veins. He was not gagged, and Hank knew the nester had discarded the precaution as useless because of the seclusion of the cabin in Wildcat Hollow.

For a while, Hank was content to lie there on his back and stare at the ceiling. But, as he fought down the pain in his eyes, he rolled his head and looked around the room. In the gloom of approaching darkness he could make out the outline of a doorway, and judged that it led to Carson's living quarters in the front of the cabin. The back room was apparently used for storage,

since there was nothing in it but a stack of jumbled cardboard cartons and a broken-down rocking chair.

It was not until Hank looked in the other direction that he realized he was not alone. And the surprise of his discovery started the pain in his head again as Hank drew his breath in sharply.

A few feet away from Hank, bound as tightly as the CPA man, was a girl. Her hair, streaming out luxuriantly on the dirty blanket beneath her, was as fiery red as Hank's own, and she had a pretty, strongly-moulded face. She was dressed in cowboy levis and a flannel shirt, and was watching Hank with an eager, hopeful glint in her eyes.

"Howdy," Hank grunted softly. "Doc Reese is always sayin' 'stone walls do not a prison make,' and stuff like that out of books, but I reckon these logs are doin' right good at that."

The girl smiled faintly at the tall redhead's calm acceptance of his predicament. "I thought he had killed you! Isn't there some way we can get out of this? I've got to get away!"

HANK squirmed over on his side and looked closer at her after he caught the urgent fear in her voice. "Who are you, miss?"

"I'm Stella Bowman," the girl answered quickly. "I came here to see Carson last night after some trouble at my uncle's place. I know I did the wrong thing now. He is not easily bluffed. I think he killed my aunt, and I'm afraid he'll do the same—"

"Your aunt didn't die," Hank interrupted quickly. "The last I heard, her chance of recovery was fairly good."

Stella Bowman's eyes brightened at Hank's words, curiosity wrinkling her brow. She looked at the redhead with new interest, showering him with questions.

But Hank talked little about himself, saying merely that the CPA had been called to Comanche to help Blaine Bowman, and that he was one of the operatives. Afterward, he tried to learn all he could about Stella Bowman.

The girl seemed to take little comfort from the fact that Steve Reese and his two aides had joined the fight against Bowman's enemies. Instead she seemed more worried, and told Hank Ball only enough to make him more curious. Though she admitted she had once been Long Lem Carson's friend, she refused to tell Hank why the nester had made her a prisoner. But she made no secret of her fear of the man, and her only thoughts were of escape.

"Where's Carson now?" Hank's mind was busy with thoughts of freedom, too, and he wondered how long he would have in which to work on the ropes. The tall redhead had much to tell Steve Reese and he knew Stella Bowman's safety would be a relief to Blaine Bowman.

"He does his cooking at an open fire outside," the girl replied. "He should be bringing us our supper before long."

Before Hank could make further plans, a boot scraped in the outer room, and the tantalizing odor of food drifted through the log partition. A moment later, Long Lem Carson pushed the door open and came into the room, a steaming bowl of stew in his hand.

He glanced down carelessly at Hank Ball, and walked over to stop beside Stella Bowman.

"I guess I'll have to feed you until I figure out what to do with you," he mused grimly. "Stella's the problem, and not you, cowboy. I'm goin' to have a stampede of them cattle you were so interested in when this thing is finished, and you're goin' to get in the way of about a hundred hoofs!"

When Hank's steady gaze reflected no fear at his threat, Carson shrugged and continued. "You'll eat one at a time. You try any tricks, cowboy, and you don't eat at all. You first, Stella."

Placing the bowl on the seat of the broken rocker, Carson knelt and freed Stella's hands, helping her to a sitting position. Then he straightened quickly, drawing his gun before he handed her the stew.

Stella accepted the hot bowl gingerly, stirring the food absently. She let her eyes slide past the tall nester, nodding covertly to Hank Ball. At first Hank did not understand, but Long Lem Carson caught the furtive signal and whirled quickly to look at the outstretched redhead.

As his feet shuffled, Stella Bowman's plan went into effect. Her own boots slid out in front of the man, tripping him. In the same instant, she flung the steaming stew at him, the burning food splattering his face. Already off balance, Long Lem Carson toppled to the floor,

howling in pain and surprise as the hot broth bit at his eyes.

As the man fell, Hank Ball made a desperate roll toward him. Though his legs were bound together, Hank still had enough freedom to lift them from the floor. Swinging his feet like a hinged piledriver, the tall redhead brought his heavy heels crashing down against Long Lem's head.

Carson was on his knees, groping for the gun he had dropped when the stew hit him. But when Hank's powerful legs descended, the man went down without a sound. He lay on the floor, his chest heaving, but he did not offer to rise.

It had been a desperate gamble, initiated by Stella Bowman and concluded by Hank Ball. There had been no previous planning, but the attack worked with the smoothness of a battle problem.

A moment later Stella had torn off the remainder of her own bonds and was tugging at the ropes which bound Hank Ball.

"I reckon Doc is goin' to be right glad to see Long Lem," Hank drawled. "We'll tie him up here and leave him for Steve Reese to work on."

CHAPTER XIII

Wild Lilacs

FIRST and foremost, Steve Reese thought it was a trick of his imagination. He awoke to find the sky dark and endless above him. Stars glittered in a million diamond-cutter's designs across the heavens, turning the land about him into a hazy, fantastic region where everything was either silver or gold.

The splendor which night had brought to the badlands was confusing, but in addition Reese caught the pleasing aroma of a perfume which had puzzled his mind before. It was the dainty, sweet-smelling scent of wild lilacs.

Reese was not dreaming. He was exactly where he had fallen. But someone was sitting at his head, now, holding a soothing damp cloth over the bullet wound. Thorn's slug had struck him on the temple, cutting a long, narrow gash along the left side of his head. When Reese raised his eyes, he saw the red-haired woman whom he had mistaken for Stella Bowman.

"Well," the CPA man murmured. His voice jarred ringing bells in his ears. "Seems like you're always right where I'm not looking."

The woman smiled. "It was lucky for you this time. I was on my way to the nester camp to see Long Lem Carson when I heard a shot. Naturally, I hurried this way and it scared off your attaker before he had time to finish you. I couldn't get you in the saddle, so I stayed with you."

Bracing his arms beneath him, Reese sat up. Dizziness pulled at him, but the woman steadied him with an arm on his shoulder. He felt better after a moment and looked at her with thoughtful, pain-reddened eyes. There was worry in her face, and he was aware that she had made a sacrifice by remaining with him. Now she seemed restless, eager to be on her way.

"Thanks for staying," Reese said earnestly, "but you could have gone on. Another inch to the left and Caleb Thorn would have done his work, but I guess I wouldn't have died from this."

She shrugged, her face suddenly sad. "I suppose it's just as well. I doubt if I could have done anything with him, Mr. Reese. You see, I know your name. I listened in on a conversation in your room and I know why you're here."

"I know that."

The woman looked at him in surprise. "One reason I stayed is because I hoped you might help me."

Reese frowned, his strength returning as a revived interest in the task that had brought him to the badlands competed with the pain. "I don't understand. I'm afraid we're on different sides."

She shook her head. "No, Mr. Reese. Not any more. You see, I'm not who you think I am."

Reese reached over and picked up the Colts which had slid from his holsters when he fell. "Maybe you are," he said quietly. "I think you're Rose Bowman—Stella's mother."

The woman could not hide her shock at Reese's ready deduction. But she was eager to talk, and asked no questions.

"That's right. After Lem saw you at the ranch, he wanted me to spy on you,

When I heard you tell your friends that Stella was missing, I was afraid she had gone to see Lem and I guessed what had happened. He denied it to me at the hotel this morning, but I was determined to see for myself this afternoon.

"After the trouble at the ranch, I suppose she thought Lem and I were responsible for Min Bowman's injury. She must have gone to him and threatened to betray us if Lem did not agree to leave the valley. Lem is dangerous when he's angry, and I'm afraid for Stella.

"I'm just beginning to realize what a fool I've been, how I've wasted my life and endangered my child! If Stella can just live through this, I—I'll live like I should. As far away from crooked gamblers as I can get!"

REESE looked seriously at the woman, feeling sorry for her and, at the same time, obtaining some satisfaction from the suffering she so rightly deserved.

"What about Carson?" he asked suspiciously. "Did he shoot Bowman's wife?"

"No. Lem has killed no one. I swear it! Our plan was to bluff Bowman away from the ranch. Since it hadn't been used for years, Lem thought he could get it by squatter's rights, but the law would not back him up. Then he ran off the cattle, hoping to break Blaine.

"But the riders were already dead when Lem made that first raid. He sent the two men who were helping him back to the Border and never tried another. Something went wrong with our plans. When the killing started, it made it hard for us, because the straddle bugs were left standing to point to Lem."

As the woman continued to talk, Reese was forced to revise his earlier plans. He had a clear-cut picture of the plot against Blaine Bowman's ranch, and was ready to close in on the leader of the outlaws to prevent any further violence.

With Long Lem Carson's motives explained, his early suspicions of the man responsible for Bowman's persecution were strengthened. He was ready to fight back, and he was eager to find Hank Ball and Dusty Trail. Already acquainted with the man's ruthlessness, he knew it would be suicide to face the killers alone.

Rose Bowman's story was one of frustrated hope and failure. Though she had never loved Curly Bill Bowman, she was angered when his will left all his belongings to his brother instead of Stella. She had come to Comanche to bluff Bowman off the ranch, knowing that Stella could claim the spread as Curly Bill's rightful heir if the B Bar B were deserted.

Stella learned of the plan, and had tried to prevent its success by going to the B Bar B to live. In that way, the girl had felt certain that her mother and Long Lem Carson would not resort to violence.

Long Lem Carson had been promised a share in the profits of the ranch for his assistance. The prospect of such wealth and power had changed the tall gambler almost immediately. Though he used a cabin at the nester camp to conceal his identity, Carson had scarcely allowed Rose Bowman out of his sight, becoming wary and suspicious, fearing that she would give up the fight and cheat him of an opportunity to grow rich.

Ambition was a dangerous flame in such men, and Reese knew the woman had ample reason for worry over her daughter.

While Rose Bowman talked, she fashioned a neat bandage from Reese's neckerchief and covered the painful scalp wound. Afterward, Reese got to his feet, his face drawn and determined.

"I'm glad you volunteered to tell me this," he told her solemnly. "It saved me the trouble of looking you up later. I was suspicious because of your resemblance to Stella, and after I saw you talking to Carson I knew who you were. Now go on back to town and hope for the best. You probably couldn't hear all we said, but I already have a man at the nester camp. This whole mess will be cleared up before daylight if none of us stop a bullet."

Rose Bowman shook Steve Reese's hand in the fashion of a man, gratitude and relief in her grasp. She walked to her horse, and rode slowly back toward Comanche. She was a different woman, both in spirit and appearance, from the comely redhead he had seen outside his hotel room. Concern over her daughter had deepened the wrinkles in her face, and her haughty manner had changed to one of humility.

She twisted once in the saddle to

wave at the dark-haired field chief, and then Reese climbed into the saddle of his own waiting horse. The solemn expression on his rugged face did not change as Reese hurried back to the B Bar B.

The worst of his fight against the hidden foe who had twice sent his hirelings to claim Reese's life was yet to come. He was glad that he had not told Blaine Bowman the reason for his ride toward the Yellowbacks, for it was too dark to attempt a climb to the caves.

By the time Steve Reese came in sight of the B Bar B, the night was densely dark. The sky had changed in its sudden way, veiled now by dirty gray clouds scudding up from the Gulf. The dim crescent of the moon was no longer visible, and purplish lightning danced out over the badlands he had just left.

He came into the ranch-yard behind the barn, moving slowly through the pressing gloom. A hundred yards away, the lamplight of the house was like a far-off beacon, and Reese was relieved that he could at last offer Blaine Bowman certain comfort.

DESPITE his haste, the field chief started toward the corral to turn the tired bay free to rest. He was almost to the shadowy outline of the pole fence when the storm came. There was no rain at first, but thunder boomed from the hills, and a rising wind picked up the dust of the yard and flung it into Reese's face. Lightning came closer, reaching among the clouds directly overhead like taloned fingers.

As the brilliant flash died away, Steve Reese leaped from saddle. For in the brief light, he had seen a huddled form lying in front of the corral gate. His breath coming fast, Reese ran forward and dropped to his knees beside the inert man. But it was not the surprise of the discovery that put the fierceness in the CPA man's face—it was the horror of it!

The face before him was young, deeply-tanned. It might have been handsome, were it not for the bruises and cuts which marked every inch of the lean jaw and high brow. The strong, straight nose was swollen and blood-crusted, the eyes puffy and blue-veined and firmly closed. The youngster was alive, but Reese found his pulse weak and fluttering.

At first Reese's only interest was in the man. But as lightning illuminated the yard again, he saw the three match sticks that lay just beyond the youngster's limp left hand. They had been left hurriedly, but there was no doubt of their meaning. The matches had been stuck into the dirt to form a miniature straddle bug! And, shoved between the buttons of the youngster's blood-stained flannel shirt, was a folded note. Reese picked it up, holding it close to his face to read the scrawling print.

The note, addressed to Blaine Bowman, said, "We're lettin' you keep what's left of Clyde Bowman tonight. If you and Steve Reese are still here at dawn tomorrow, we'll be back for him. It will be our last trip."

The only signature was a rough drawing of a straddle bug.

Fury such as he had never known coursed through Reese as he shifted to get his arms beneath Clyde Bowman's shoulders. Though he had feared ill treatment of the youth, he had expected nothing as heartless as this. While Reese had lain unconscious on the trail, the outlaws had skirted the badlands to leave Clyde Bowman as a warning to Blaine Bowman and the CPA. The thunder that boomed around the field chief seemed no louder than the echo of his own angry pulse beat.

Just as Reese knelt to put the youngster across his shoulder, he heard the rustle of brush beyond the corral and jerked erect. He caught a vague glimpse of a man creeping away, heading cautiously through the tall sage toward the post-oak grove farther on. Hoping Clyde Bowman's kidnaper had not yet escaped, the CPA man relaxed his hold on the unconscious youngster and moved away. Clyde could fare no worse for the next few minutes, but the outlaws could plan another attack.

Vaulting the corral fence, Reese sprinted across the enclosure and crossed the other side. The fleeing man saw him coming, and broke into a run toward the horse which stood fifty yards away. By the intermittent lightning flashes, Reese kept the man in sight, gaining steadily on him.

"Pull up!" Reese shouted firmly, drawing his gun. "Pull up or I'll let you have it!"

But the man did not slow his wobbling run. Reese caught the white out-

line of a face as the man flung a glance over his shoulder, and then the skulker increased his speed in desperation. Reese fired as he ran, the roar of the Colt filling the stillness left by a dying thunderclap. The bullet went wide, lacing the air with a red streak near the gun barrel, and Reese was ready to fire again when the man answered him.

"Stay away from me, Reese," the runner yelled as he neared his horse. "Adam Faith's in the house and he'll gum up the works."

Surprise cut across Reese's brow, but he did not stop the chase. The voice had been the resonant drawl of Charlie Claw.

CHAPTER XIV

Outlaw Loot

INDECISION gripped Steve Reese as he neared Charlie Claw. The brown-eyed waddy's mission in Comanche Valley was still unexplained, and Reese was dubious about shooting the man. But he was determined not to let Claw escape until he was sure the young outlaw had not delivered Clyde Bowman's battered form to the corral gate.

As Claw reached the waiting horse, Reese was still ten yards behind him. The lean-hipped waddy jabbed a foot at the stirrup, his hand reaching for the horn. Seeing that the man was about to escape, Reese came to a halt, his right foot sliding out in front of him for support.

The field chief assumed the stance of a bolero thrower then, his hand cocked behind his ear. Aiming carefully, he slung the heavy Colt, the weapon whirling end over end as it sailed out from his hand.

Reese would have called it nothing but a lucky blow. The gun struck Charlie Claw high on the back of the head, half its force cushioned by the rolled brim of his hat. Nevertheless, Claw never knew what hit him. He dropped like a log.

"Reese! Steve Reese! Is that you out there?"

Reese yelled an answer, and Sheriff Adam Faith came running toward him. He had heard Reese's shot a moment earlier, and now the wizened lawman had his own gun out, his sad blue eyes rolling in every direction.

"Bowman started with me," Faith panted. "But we found Clyde out there by yore horse and he took him back to the house. Where—"

Adam Faith's voice stopped on the word when he saw Steve Reese throwing Charlie Claw's limp form across the saddle of the horse. He stepped closer, his long face beaming with satisfaction.

"Got the gent that was holdin' Clyde, huh? Charlie Claw. Well, yuh'll have to turn him over to me, Reese. I've got first—"

"Clyde was at the corral when I rode up," Reese cut in. "There's no proof that Charlie Claw is involved. I just saw Claw in the shadows and took out after him."

Adam Faith cleared his throat. "Jest the same I want him. He broke in on Bowman, threatened his life. That'll put him back where he belongs. Comanche ain't safe until all of Curly Bill's gang are in Boot Hill."

"Let's get him in the house," Reese said curtly. "We'll talk about that later."

Carrying his limp form between them, Reese and Adam Faith took Charlie Claw inside the house and deposited him on a bearskin rug before the unused fireplace. As Reese turned away, Adam Faith knelt and fastened a pair of handcuffs on the unconscious man's wrists.

Clyde Bowman lay on the couch behind them, and Blaine Bowman was loosening the youngster's clothing to inspect his injuries. The old rancher looked up curiously when they brought in Charlie Claw, a question in his eyes.

"We won't know anything until Claw comes around," Reese said, blocking Adam Faith's accusations. The field chief continued then with a resume of his ride into the badlands, and it was the first time either of the others had noticed the bandage that showed under his hat brim.

"This was fastened to Clyde's shirt," Reese added, handing Blaine Bowman the note he had found.

The rancher's face seemed to cave in with hopelessness as he scanned the message. He sighed, turning a pained look on the beaten face of his son.

"Yuh've done a lot for me, Reese," he said slowly. "Come here and risked yore life—all for nothin'. I reckon Charlie Claw is the only one of the killers we'll get. Yuh can't fight a man like Long Lem Carson. He stayed behind and sent Claw here."

Bowman ceased talking and whirled around as the front door banged open. A tall, red-haired cowboy stood before them, his dripping levis showing that the rain had started. Then Blaine Bowman's face glowed momentarily as Stella Bowman slipped through the doorway and ran toward the old rancher.

"Hank!" Reese said happily. "I've been expecting you. Where's Dusty?"

HANK Ball closed the door and came forward frowning. "Dusty? I ain't seen that weed-smokin' windbag since I left yuh. Long Lem Carson's been enjoyin' my company too much."

"Carson had both of us tied up," Stella Bowman said, relaxing her happy hold on Blaine Bowman's arm. She saw Clyde's battered figure on the couch for the first time then, and did not complete her explanation. But as she started toward the youth, Charlie Claw groaned faintly and she turned that way.

"What—" she began questioningly. "Charlie!"

She ran to the bearskin rug, kneeling beside the slim-hipped waddy, who was regaining consciousness. "Oh, Charlie, what's happened to you?"

Stella Bowman's face was flushed and excited as she helped Charlie Claw to a sitting position, and Reese knew his hunch that the two young people were in love had been correct.

Reese was so interested in the actions of the girl, that he forgot about Hank Ball for a moment. He found the sheriff and Blaine Bowman still staring curiously at the tall redhead, and the field chief introduced him, explaining that Hank was one of his aides, and that another, Dusty Trail, was at the Rocking T.

"I heard yuh say Long Lem was messed up in things here tonight," Hank said after a while. "I don't think he was, because I left him roped and hog tied at the nester camp. But he's got yore cattle up there starvin' 'em to death in a box canyon."

Adam Faith looked up quickly and Blaine Bowman's eyes shone with interest. Hank told them of his ride into the hills, and of his fight with the nester.

"But you'll have to find out from Stella how she got there," Hank concluded. "She acts like it was a secret."

While Hank was talking, Reese let his eyes rove over Clyde Bowman's soiled clothing and worn riding boots. He noticed the same grayish, sooty soil clinging to Clyde's shoes that he had seen on the killer's boots at the hotel. It was definite proof that he would have found Clyde that day if Caleb Thorn had not stopped him.

"Stella's capture was a secret," Reese affirmed, turning back to the others. "She thought she was protecting her mother by not telling why Carson held her."

In answer to Blaine Bowman's startled look, Reese told them of Rose Bowman's part in the attacks against the B Bar B. He had omitted the meeting with the woman in his account of the badlands ride, waiting until he was ready to attempt a rescue of the girl before he added a new fear to the rancher's tortured mind.

"Then who's behind the killin' of my men, and Clyde's kidnappin'," Bowman asked. "Is Charlie Claw bossin' them hooded sidewinders?"

It was not necessary for Reese to answer the question, for Stella Bowman moved toward them, her hand on Charlie Claw's arm. Claw was on his feet, but his eyes still looked weak and groggy. He stared perplexedly at the handcuffs on his arms, and sent a flickering gaze over Adam Faith's long face.

"You're wrong about Charlie, too," Stella declared, her eyes on the brown-eyed waddy at her side. "He got some time off by agreeing to wear a U. S. Marshal's badge. He was sent here under cover because he knows the Curly Bill gang."

"What?" Adam Faith's eyes threatened to pop from their sockets.

"That's right," Claw said. "You'll find my credentials under the sweatband of my hat, Sheriff. I come here to get the rest of the gang because one of 'em killed my brother after Curly Bill died.

"Yuh hear a lot of things in the pen, and I didn't like what I heard about the way they killed him. Tortured him because Caleb Thorn and some of the others thought Curly Bill told him where the gold was hid. Me'n my

brother was sort of favorites with Curly."

"Caleb Thorn! One of Curly Bill's men?" The surprises were beginning to turn the sheriff's face a fiery pink.

CHARLIE Claw went on softly, his voice grim with memories. "Yeah, that's a new name he's wearin'. I figured he'd be afraid Reese was here to recover the gold and would try to kill him. He thought I was after it, because I saw some of 'em scoutin' the hills for me today."

"What gold?" Adam Faith asked suspiciously. "There ain't a trace of payin' ore in —"

"Thirty thousand dollars worth of gold ingots," Claw cut in firmly, "that Curly Bill stole from a Government pack train. That's the bait I hoped to catch 'em with. I found the bait, because I knew where Curly Bill cached things here when he had time to ride this way. I've been watching it, because I figured it was a good way to catch 'em all together with their new boss.

"When I first came here, I thought Blaine Bowman might be my man so I busted in on him to see what he knowed. A man generally tries to make a deal with another crook when there's a gun in his ribs, so I let him think I hadn't changed."

Adam Faith stamped dubiously across the room and picked up Charlie Claw's hat. "I'll believe all that when I see the gold. What was yuh doin' here tonight? You ain't explained that to suit me."

"The gold's under the hollow ledge at Comanche Falls," Claw answered. He looked at Stella Bowman and grinned sheepishly. "It ain't none of yore business what I was doin' here tonight, sheriff. I didn't even know Clyde Bowman was out there, until I saw Reese lookin' at him. You've got my credentials in yore hands, and that's enough. I ran from Reese because I didn't want to explain all this to you right now."

When Charlie Claw finished talking, Adam Faith grudgingly unlocked the handcuffs. The brown-eyed waddy had answered many questions for Blaine Bowman, but the rancher still held a somber reminder of the outlaw's ruthlessness in his hand. He looked again at the note Reese had given him, and heaved a tired sigh.

"We're no better off," he said doggedly. "The life of my son is worth more than this ranch and all its stolen gold. We still don't know who's leadin' the killers and they mean what they say. If I'd obeyed that first note my wife would never have been hurt. This time I'm loadin' Clyde up in a wagon, and goin' over to Doc Norton's place until Min is able to travel. Then I'm makin' tracks out of Comanche Valley."

Steve Reese knew he could never let that happen. His conscience would have no rest if he allowed Blaine Bowman to give up what was rightfully his, relinquishing his dreams and hopes to a merciless band of killers and thieves. The CPA had pledged help to such men, and it was Steve Reese's duty to see that the pledge was fulfilled.

The dark-haired field chief patted the big rancher's shoulder encouragingly, his face set in firm lines. "You're wrong this time, Bowman. I know who the outlaw boss is now, and he'll have to kill me before he raids the B Bar B again!"

CHAPTER XV

Killer Boss

ONLY the dimming roll of distant thunder and the steady beat of the rain against the windows could be heard in the room for a moment after Reese spoke. Though all of them had vague suspicions in their minds, they knew the conviction in Reese's firm voice was not based on guesswork.

Hank Ball was the first to speak. He moved a step closer to the field chief and said, "Who is it, Doc? Who've you pegged?"

"Tack Gordon," Reese answered evenly. "He's the gent behind the killin' and Bowman's trouble. He was after that gold."

Sheriff Adam Faith whirled toward the CPA man, disbelief in his eyes. "You're crazy, Reese! If Caleb Thorn is a Curly Bill man Gordon don't know it or the man wouldn't be alive. You know yoreself that Gordon hates Curly Bill and all his kin. That don't make

him a killer."

"No," Reese conceded, eyeing the little lawman steadily, "but Curly Bill Bowman's gold made Gordon a killer. The old gang knew it was somewhere on the B Bar B, but they couldn't risk a long search with Blaine Bowman here, and they was afraid all the time that the Government might send a man lookin' for it. To get at it they had to find a leader with enough power to buy Blaine out or run him out.

"After Long Lem Carson threatened Blaine, they wore those hoods to keep us guessin'. Caleb Thorn picked Tack Gordon for the boss, and then stayed around close to make sure Gordon didn't doublecross them. That's the way it's bound to be. When I came here, they got in a rush and showed their hand."

"Can you prove that, Reese?" Adam Faith asked stubbornly.

"Most of it," Reese snapped, "but I don't have time to do a lot of talkin'. I aim to hit the Rockin' T before Tack Gordon can do any more killin'. I'll need some help."

"Ain't we goin' to wait for Dusty?" Hank asked quickly. "He'll bust a suspender if he don't get in on this."

Reese looked at his tall companion, and Hank saw the worry in the field chief's face. "That's why I'm rushin' things, Hank. Dusty would have been here if everything was all right. I'm afraid they learned Dusty was a CPA man, and you can't tell what they'll do."

"Let's go," Hank said grimly, tugging at his gun belts. "If they've so much as stole one of Dusty's stinkin' smokes I'll take it out of their hides!"

Reese and Hank headed anxiously for the door, and Charlie Claw stepped forward to join them.

"Stella can look after Clyde, I reckon," Blaine Bowman said tightly. "I think he'll be all right after some rest. This is one fight I ain't aimin' to miss!"

The big-gray-haired rancher grabbed his guns, and Reese felt satisfaction in his company. Blaine Bowman deserved a part in this more than any of the others, and Reese made no move to stop him because of his age. Vengeance was sometimes a worthy saddle partner.

The four men were almost to the door when Adam Faith's highpitched voice stopped them. "I can't allow no deliberate war until I know more than I do now, Reese," the little lawman cautioned. "But if yuh want another gun in this fight, speak up."

Reese decided the sheriff's help would be worth the waste of time. He spoke rapidly, his hand on the door handle.

"I suspected the motive behind Bowman's trouble the night Charlie Claw popped in here," Reese said flatly. "But it was hard to get some link between the hooded killers and the real boss. Gordon made his first mistake when he sent that killer after me at the hotel. He probably left the jail right after I saw him there with you, and then popped up again when the excitement started. That way he had time to contact his man, maybe one of the loafers I saw at the saloon when I rode in."

Adam Faith nodded. "You're right about that. He went over to the Town House right after you left us."

REESE continued tersely. "That hooded gent had bat guano on his boots, and that meant he'd been somewhere near a bat nesting ground—probably in some cave. I had seen Tack Gordon with that bat in his hand, and it made me think he might have been near the outlaw hideout.

"The thing that convinced me was Clyde Bowman's delivery here tonight. He was ordered returned some time after I had a run-in with Thorn today. There hadn't been time for a horse to travel to the Yellowback caves and return, so I knew the outlaws had received their instructions some other way. That message was carried by a bat.

"Gordon couldn't risk bein' seen up there too often, so he rode up at night and brought some of the bats back with him—his so-called hobby. When he needed Curly Bill's old gang for a job, he tied a message to one of the bats and turned it loose.

"If you know anything about Indian warfare, Faith, you'll remember some of the biggest war chiefs used that trick, and it works. Bats always go back to their home cave. When I found bat guano on Clyde's clothes tonight, that was the link between Gordon and Blaine's trouble."

The field chief opened the door and stepped out into the falling rain. "You comin' now, Faith?"

Adam Faith was at his side in a few swift steps. "You're smart, Reese," he

grunted. "Mebbe you're smart enough to tell me how I can keep my job if this thing don't work."

He stepped off the porch into the mud of the yard, still matching strides with the dark-haired field chief. Reese made no reply but he could not mask a chuckle when he noticed the astonished expression on Adam Faith's horselike face.

They saddled in silence, hardly conscious of the rain as each of them let his thoughts run to the task facing them. Reese swapped the tired bay for one of Bowman's horses, a dependable dun. He swung into saddle first, and looked at the men around him. Every face was sober, every gun belt filled. Reese's eyes met those of Hank Ball for a moment, and they shared an old feeling of close comradeship. This was nothing new to them, but they were wise enough to realize it might be their last ride.

"I been thinkin'," Adam Faith said tensely as he came alongside the field chief. "Accordin' to you, we've got two gangs to fight—one at the ranch, and one at the caves. That's a big order for five men."

"Right," Reese said quietly. "There's a chance we might be able to cut those odds down some. I figure to let Tack Gordon's little black messenger boy lend us a hand with the crew in the hills."

Adam Faith did not understand the field chief's odd answer, and Hank Ball gave Reese a quizzical stare. Reese did not give them time to inquire about the meaning. He looked around him and saw that all were mounted, Hank Ball and Adam Faith on either side of him, and Blaine Bowman and Charlie Claw behind. Before the sheriff could speak again, the CPA man jabbed his heels into the dun's flanks and sped away, his head slightly bent against the driving rain.

It was a somber caravan that galloped through the wet night. Clothed in glistening black ponchos which Blaine Bowman had passed out when they reached the barn, each man seemed a part of the darkness itself. As soon as they were out of the ranch-yard, Reese dropped back. Blaine Bowman knew the territory, and Reese motioned for him to take the lead. The big rancher set a rapid pace, sweeping out of his own rolling pastures and into the flats to the south.

Stinging brush slapped at their legs, briars tore at their faces and hands, and the rain put a soggy dampness into their bones. But the discomfort did not slow them. Blaine Bowman did not speak once until a flickering light finally showed against the black earth ahead of them.

"There it is," Bowman said between clenched teeth. "Let's go!"

"Wait!" It was Steve Reese's steady voice that stopped them, halting an impulsive approach that would have meant death for all of them. The others turned to face him expectantly, knowing that the cool-nerved CPA man was again in command.

"It's a bad night for war," Hank Ball drawled softly. "Mighty pore shootin' light." There was no excitement in Hank's voice, and Reese knew the others would take comfort from his coolness. But he knew, also, that Hank was keyed to the tenseness he felt himself, eager to extend justice to the men who had plotted to destroy a man and his family in their wild lust for gold.

"What's yore plan, Reese?" Charlie Claw asked impatiently. "I got a debt to settle here, too."

THE field chief said nothing for a while, his eyes studying the dark buildings ahead. The Rocking T was arranged in much the same order as the B Bar B. The house sat in front of the other buildings, the top of the barn showing some distance to the rear. Farther on were the corrals, and to the left was a long bunkhouse. Directly ahead of the waiting men was a winding creek, screened on each side by brush that led past the house, and a hundred yards east of the flat veranda.

"We'll ride up the creek," Reese said presently. "The brush will keep us hidden until we're close to the house. Hank, you take the sheriff and Claw first. Sneak up to the back porch and stay there until you hear Bowman and me come in the front. We want to get inside and see Gordon before the gunhawks know we're here. If trouble starts we'll stand a better chance inside. It's our best bet, and this rain ought to keep 'em housed up."

There was no debate. Hank nodded and rode away, Faith and Charlie Claw following silently. Once the tall redhead turned in the saddle, a frown on

his face. "Don't nobody shoot Dusty by mistake."

"I don't think he's here, Hank," Reese replied, touched by the redhead's concern. "I figure Caleb Thorn saw him talkin' to me on the trail today. That means Thorn has sent him to the cave by now."

Hank went on, slipping out of sight amid the willows and weeds of the creek bank. Reese waited until the muffled sloshing of the horses' hoofs died in the distance, and then faced Blaine Bowman.

"I knew you'd want to see Gordon with me," he said quietly. "Let's go, Blaine."

Until they were even with the big clapboard ranch house, Steve Reese and Blaine Bowman moved up the creek in silence. Then the field chief nudged the dun through the brush and stopped. He stepped down, leaving the horse in the deeper shadows as Bowman dismounted beside him. The rain had not stopped, but the thunder and lightning had subsided, and there was nothing left but a misty drizzle.

Staring thoughtfully at the house ahead, Reese dumped the poncho from his shoulders and left it across the saddle. He wanted nothing to slow him now, for speed and sheer daring were all that could gain victory for them in the lopsided showdown that was only a few minutes away.

Drawing the Colts to keep them from jarring out of place, Reese said: "We'll run from here to the veranda as hard as we can go. Don't stop, and shoot at anything that gets in your way. We've got to get inside to beat both gangs. Hang close to me, Blaine."

With the last word of his instructions fading on his lips, Steve Reese was gone. He sprinted out into the open, his shoulders hunched low, and a six-gun waving in each hand. The soggy ground muffled his footsteps, and he could hear Blaine Bowman's labored breathing behind him. They passed nothing on the way, for the bunkhouse was beyond the house and, luckily, Tack Gordon had no dogs running free to sound an alarm.

Reese pulled up at the steps, his breath coming hard and the bullet wound throbbing in his temple for the first time in hours. Blaine Bowman came a second behind him, his chest heaving. He started to sink into the shadows to rest, but Reese shook his head.

"It's now or never, Blaine. The longer we think of the odds, the harder it'll be to open that door and walk in."

Blaine Bowman nodded, and Reese crept cautiously up on the porch. Lamplight gleamed against the shaded windows, and the field chief realized he was silhouetted there against the door. But he did not hesitate long enough to make much of a target.

As soon as Blaine Bowman touched his elbow, Steve Reese twisted the handle and shoved the panel wide in front of him. Bowman came in right behind him, gun drawn, and slammed the door shut almost in the same instant.

LIKE most bachelors, Tack Gordon utilized his big parlor to the fullest extent. He had merged his office and sitting room, and he was sitting there behind a cluttered desk when Steve Reese entered.

For a second after the door slammed, Tack Gordon stared at the two rain-drenched figures as if they were weird apparitions of the night. He looked questioningly at the two guns in the CPA man's hands, recognizing the cold fury in those hard black eyes. It took him only an instant to guess the reason for their visit. The blood drained from his wide, flabby face and seemed to gather in his sagging jowls, turning them scarlet.

"Don't move another inch, Gordon," Steve Reese commanded icily as Gordon's hand edged away from the papers in front of him and started toward his shoulder-rigged holster. "You've lost the whole hand, Gordon, and after I've found out what happened to Dusty Trail, you can go ahead and reach. If Dusty ain't alive, I wouldn't mind a bit pullin' this trigger!"

"Let him have it, Reese," Blaine Bowman ground out. "He's goin' to hang for killin' my cowhands, anyway."

There was no immediate answer from Tack Gordon. The big flabby-faced man sat as if mute, and then a chill shook his stocky frame as he glanced absently at the imprisoned bat in the cage on one corner of the desk. He knew instinctively that the CPA man had taken a clue from the silent black mammal.

Men like Tack Gordon were only good when they held all the advantage. Stark fear came into his slate-colored eyes, crowding out the amazement that had been there at first.

"You—you're all wrong." he said raspingly, his eyes going to the fierce face of big Blaine Bowman. "It wasn't me that shot your wife, Bowman. I gave the orders, but it was—it was Thorn —Caleb Thorn!"

The man's voice had risen almost to a scream, as if he were calling to someone far away. Too late, Steve Reese saw the whisky bottle and two glasses sitting on the table beside Tack Gordon's chair. Even as he realized there had been someone else in the room shortly before, a voice came from the hallway to his left. Caleb Thorn had stepped out of the room for a moment, but he was back now.

Thorn said in a hard voice, "You callin' —what the—!"

The towering, wide-shouldered killer stopped talking and started moving as his eyes gathered in the scene. Like a writhing snake, he dodged aside, his hand yanking at his gun. A bullet blasted the room, and Reese heard Blaine Bowman's grunt of pain as it found a mark.

But the big rancher stayed on his feet, fury and determination holding him up. Reese caught only a glimpse of Caleb Thorn's wide face turning blood-red as Bowman's gun roared an answer. Afterward, the field chief was too busy saving his own life to watch.

CHAPTER XVI

Showdown in the Dark

MISDIRECTED in his attention by Thorn's appearance, Reese turned back to Tack Gordon almost too late. With aid in sight, the terrified rancher's nerve had returned. He already had the gun out when Reese switched his gaze. His soft lips peeled back from glittering, grinning teeth, Tack Gordon shot across the desk. The slug burned a long raw blister beneath Steve Reese's armpit. And then the greed-crazed rancher died that way, the same ugly grin on his face.

Reese almost dropped his lefthand gun as pain shot through his body, but the other weapon did not falter. It spat lead and flame almost at the instant Gordon fired. The slug left hardly a visible mark as it burrowed into the man's heart, but Tack Gordon died in the chair and sat there with his head lolled back grinning.

Acrid gunpowder and the smell of death scented the room as silence dropped like a pall over the Rocking T. Reese turned and saw Blaine Bowman lying on the floor in front of Caleb Thorn's lifeless form.

"How is it, Bowman?" he asked anxiously.

The old rancher stirred, mustering a brave grin. "Just restin', Reese. Got my shoulder, but none of the bone. I can stand the pain."

The silence was short-lived. An ear-splitting yell cut through the heavy air, and Reese looked out the window to see men piling out of the bunkhouse. A gun flashed then, and lead plunked into the side of the house.

Two guns rattled a reply, and Hank Ball's rousing voice rose clearly above the noise. "Get back, yuh mangy sons. This place is runnin' under a new iron!"

The Rocking T gunmen returned to shelter as the redhead, aided by Adam Faith and Charlie Claw, sent more slugs screaming toward them. But their retreat was only temporary. They went out the back way, circling over the yard.

Five minutes later guns popped and blazed behind every tree and bush around the ranchhouse. They had already guessed what had happened inside, and were not hesitant about firing at the house. A window splintered in front of Reese, and a humming slug hissed through the room and rammed into one of the walls.

Reese dropped to the floor, blowing out the lamp as he moved.

"The battle's on, Blaine," he said grimly. "You keep 'em busy a minute. I've got to mail a letter."

"What?" Blain Bowman exploded. He was up on his hands and knees, crawling toward a window, and for a moment he thought Reese was deserting him.

The field chief chuckled dryly. "The

bat cage. If they answer Gordon's calls, maybe they'll answer one for me."

"Great Delilah!" Bowman moaned. "How we goin' to stand off the crew from the caves when already we got our hands full?"

Reaching the desk, the field chief was silent while he felt around for the bat cage. He found it and brought it to the floor beside him. Then he found the pencil Tack Gordon had been using a few minutes before, and ripped a sheet of paper from a pad he had noticed on the desk.

"What would you think, Bowman, if you rode in here and found the Rockin' T bein' fired on?" Reese asked quietly. "You'd think it was friends inside and enemies outside, wouldn't you?"

Revelation brought a sigh of approval from the old rancher as he laid his Colt across the window ledge and fired at a moving shadow. A man yelled in pain, and Bowman cackled with satisfaction.

"Now I know why yuh wanted to get in the house. That had me buffaloed for a while."

The warning note Reese had seen at the Bowman ranch had been a scrawling print and hastily written. Hoping that apparent carelessness would veil the forgery, Reese did not bother to seek a light. He spread the paper on the smooth pine floor and worked in the dark, knowing that it did not need a signature since Gordon would never have risked signing his name.

Reese wrote: "Need you here. House under attack." He paused a moment, and then added another line before he folded the paper and reached for the bat cage.

Within two minutes, Reese was beside Blaine Bowman at the broken window. He lifted his arm above the opening, his wrist bending outward. There was a flutter and a squeak, and the field chief eased down beside the rancher.

"There he goes, Bowman," he said softly, "and he's our only chance of gettin' out alive. Gordon must have had something planned tonight, for there was a clip already fastened to the bat. At least that part of it was done right. I hope that gang up there is checkin' 'em as they come in."

There was a prayer in Blaine Bowman's sharp-drawn breath.

"Mebbe this rain will drive him straight home."

TAKING time to bandage Bowman's shoulder from torn strips of the man's shirt, Reese slipped on to another window. He knocked the glass out with his gun barrel, his eyes searching the yard. The sound of the breaking window brought a shot whizzing his way, the slug kicking splinters into the field chief's face. Reese ducked and then fired at a gunflash which winked from behind a cedar shrub. He heard no sound, but the gunflash was not repeated and he knew his aim had been true.

Outside, the gunfire became a steady roll of booming sound. The fury of the Rocking T gun crew was undiminished by the fire from the house, and Reese saw that they were dangerously outnumbered. The CPA man's guns grew hot in his hands as he continued to fight, his face grimy and powder-blackened. The increasing roar sent dizziness sweeping through Reese's head at times and the gash on his temple pained sharply.

Reese was shoving fresh shells into his Colts for the fourth time when Hank Ball moved into the darkness beside him, carrying something across his back.

It's the sheriff," Hank said. "They got him through the hip. He's out cold."

Hank put the frail lawman down in the corner, and Blaine Bowman hurried over to treat Faith's wound. As Hank moved closer, Reese saw blood dripping out of his red hair and streaming down his face.

"You all right, Hank?"

"Feel sort of woozy, Doc," Hank admitted. "Somebody tried to part my hair too deep. Claw's got a slug in his leg. We've been fightin' two hours, Doc, and they don't seem much weaker."

Reese looked worried. "Get Claw in here. It's gettin' too rough out there."

Hank hurried away, and returned presently with Charlie Claw. The brown-eyed waddy, whom they knew now to be a U. S. Marshal, could barely move, dragging one leg painfully as he crawled along the floor. But he found a place at a window, and kept firing.

It was a long time before anyone spoke again. Every man picked his spot, staying there and firing relentlessly as bullets continued to whack splinters from the clapboard walls. The rain was still falling monotonously, but in the east the sky was turning slowly gray.

The fear of failure began to tug at Reese's nerves. The gang at the caves had had plenty of time to receive the message and reach the Rocking T. But the only sound outside was the crackling gunfire and the shrill whistle of flying lead. "We're goners, Reese," Blaine Bowman declared meekly at last. "We're too shot up to get away, and we can't hold them off much longer."

Reese would have agreed on their chances of escape, but there was no surrender in him. The gunmen outside had worked closer, and lead peppered the house from all directions since Hank and the others had deserted the back porch.

All at once it grew quiet outside, the attacking guns idle. Reese's heart leaped in desperation. It was a bad sign, and he waited breathlessly to see what the Rocking T crew was planning. A few minutes later the pounding of hoofs from the direction of the corral told him. Then the gunmen, mounted and riding low in their saddles, swept rapidly toward the house.

Seeing the approach of dawn, the attackers were making their last charge before the sun rose to reveal their positions. The guns started again, and Reese dropped to the floor as singing lead cut a criss-crossing pattern over his head.

"They're goin' to try to get in here, Doc," Hank breathed uneasily, guessing the Rocking T strategy. "They'll be hard to stop, comin' in fast on a horse."

Hank had hardly finished speaking when the horsemen swung out in front of the house, heading for the open windows. Steve Reese fired deliberately as he stood up to meet the charge.

A man threw up his arms and tumbled from the saddle, writhing and rolling in the yard. Another screamed hollowly as Hank Ball's Colt bucked in his fist. And then the horses were in front of the veranda and men were piling down. Boots rattled across the porch, and a brawny arm came through the window almost in Reese's face.

REESE unfolded like a coiled spring, leaping up to bring his gun smashing down on the man's head as he tried to climb inside. At the same time, he saw red-headed Hank Ball grab a hulking shadow and throw it bodily back to the ground.

A gun boomed almost in Reese's face, and he pressed the trigger of his own Colt, firing point-blank at the burly figure that blocked the window. He heard a guttural, growling sound and the form disappeared.

Shifting from side to side, Reese was everywhere at once, clubbing at bobbing heads, firing at every flash. He knew it could not last, for there seemed to be no end to the steady parade of men who tried to crowd into the room.

Above the noise of battle, the field chief finally heard a new sound—the drumming of more horses. For a second, he thought the Rocking T men had divided their force into two charges and his hopes sank. But as lead came humming at the backs of the dismounted men, Reese knew the truth. It was the Curly Bill gang from the caves—it had to be!

Orange flashes from the new guns blossomed far down the creek, and the Rocking T men suddenly dived away from the porch and sought cover in the yard again.

"We're caught between 'em," a Rocking T man yelled hoarsely. "Get the new bunch before they get here."

Confusion gripped the yard from then on. Men yelled and cursed while horses milled continuously and neighed in terror. It gave Reese and Hank Ball and the other men time to recover their breath and reload their guns.

"What in tarnation happened out there?" Hank Ball asked curiously.

"Gordon's men are fightin' each other," Reese said with relief. "We've got to get 'em all, now, before it gets light enough for them to see their mistake. Can everybody walk?

"All but the sheriff," Hank replied. "Charlie Claw has a time of it, but he's still stickin' to it."

Reese nodded. "We'll slip out the back way and separate. Get as wide apart as you can and use a gun in each hand if you have them. When I open up, all of you fire like blazes. You don't have to hit anything, but make enough noise to sound like an army. Then everybody yell at the same time."

With the men engaged in close combat outside, Reese's party had no trouble in reaching the yard. Reese stayed close to the bullet-marked veranda, the others fanning out on each side of the blazing gun battle. He waited five minutes, and

then gripped his black Colts firmly and stepped into the open.

The rapid fire of the field chief's twin Colts brought a yell of surprise from the gunmen. Momentarily, eyes swung that way and he braced himself for a hail of lead. But it did not come. At that moment other close-spaced shots barked spasmodically from both sides of the yard, and Hank Ball's voice rose in a defiant yell.

"Better give up, the lot of you," Hank cried. "Yuh ain't got a chance!"

"Surrender!" Blaine Bowman's deep voice cried harshly, and Charlie Claw joined in with a new threat.

Reese fired again, triggering wildly as the gunfire beyond dwindled uncertainly. "You're surrounded," the field chief called loudly. "Throw your guns up here at me, and stand as you are. All of you come out without your guns and nobody will get hit by mistake!"

It was a tense time while Reese waited for their decision. He had made an odd request, a puzzling request. Neither party knew whom they were fighting, or that the house was now deserted.

Reese expected them to obey quickly, or to cut him down with lead before he moved. And it was the field chief's daring stance in the open that broke their nerve. The outlaws were certain no man would expose himself in such a way unless there were many guns to support him.

The Rocking T men made the first move, their numbers depleted by the scorching fire from the house and the later attack from the new force that stopped their charge. A six-gun came sailing out of the brush and plopped into the mud at Reese's feet. Others joined it there until an assortment of weapons dotted the ground.

A BEARDED, blood-streaked man came out of the darkness a moment later. Seven others came behind him one at a time, and Hank Ball and Charlie Claw came out to stand beside Reese as the men shucked their weapons and stood still. By then, six newcomers had joined the ranks of the Rocking T surrender, and Reese could tell by the cut of their faces and the freshness of their eyes that these were the men from the caves.

It was a strange surrender, for the Curly Bill gang had parted with their guns only as a safety measure in the hazy light, expecting eventual freedom since they believed it was friends of Tack Gordon who had demanded their guns.

By the time they looked around at each other and discovered their mistake, Blaine Bowman had returned from the barn with enough pigging strings to tie each man's hands at his back.

Steve Reese and his partners had fought a total of nineteen men, but Blaine Bowman only used thirteen strings. Scattered around the wet yard could be seen the huddled, lifeless forms of six others who did not need to be tied. The Curly Bill gang was completely broken, and the gunslamming riders of Tack Gordon had been taught a lesson in blood.

After helping Bowman and Claw herd the prisoners inside the Rocking T headquarters, Reese and Hank Ball left the two men on guard and hurried back outside. It took them only a few minutes to find what they were looking for.

Beyond the barn they saw a lone horse standing with its head drooping, trying to get its muzzle against the wet grass. Sitting in the saddle, a rope holding his feet in the stirrups and his hands tied securely behind his back, was the blocky, rain-drenched figure of Dusty Trail!

Hank Ball's lean face broke into a wide grin at sight of his companion, and he took a quick step forward. Then he slowed, his arm touched Reese's shoulder.

"You smell anything burnin' around here, Doc?" he drawled absently. "Seems nigh impossible with all this rain, but—"

His voice trailed off thoughtfully as a series of muffled snorts drifted back from the horse and Dusty Trail squirmed anxiously in the saddle.

Steve Reese chuckled and ran forward, ripping the gag from Dusty's mouth and drawing off the ropes that bound him. The stocky CPA man was on the ground in an instant, his feet braced defiantly in front of Hank Ball.

"Don't yuh say a word, yuh lop-eared braggart," Dusty roared. "I can tell by that sickly face of your'n that it's all over. Hadn't been for that Caleb Thorn gettin' the drop on me in the toolshed after I run across one of them hoods hid there, I'd been here to save yuh from gettin' that blood smeared all over yore face."

"I ain't sayin' a word," Hank said innocently. "But it's a mighty wet night just to be settin' and star-gazin."

"Star gazin' me eye!" Dusty growled "Wonder I ain't got the croup. Them gents had me up there all day in a cave, just waitin' for Tack Gordon to salivate me. They kept pacin' around tonight waitin' for a message, and then they finally loaded me up and rode here. What happened, Doc?"

As they walked back to the house, Reese told Dusty of their attack on the Rocking T and the ruse that had turned the battle in their favor. "One thing that note said," Reese concluded, "was to bring in the prisoner for questioning. I figured Thorn would be watching you after we met on the trail today. He must have seen us."

The gray of dawn was lifting rapidly and the rain was drying up by the time the CPA trio returned to the house. Sheriff Adam Faith had regained consciousness, but both the lawman and Charlie Claw were beginning to suffer from the pain of their injuries.

"Reckon I'll live," Faith said gruffly, "and still hold my job. But I won't be walkin' for a while."

Charlie Claw managed a weak smile. "That's too bad, Sheriff. You was so doubtful about the stolen gold bein' at the creek, I was aimin' to let you get it out and return it to the Government. That's goin' to be a mighty wet job and it's got to be done today."

"Huh," Faith snorted. "You're a marshal. You worry about it. All I want to do is get these hellions into town and into jail. It's the end of the Curly Bill gang. I tried it for years, but it took Steve Reese to outsmart 'em."

THE field chief shrugged away the man's admiring remark and stood up. He motioned to Hank and Dusty, and the three of them started for the door.

"We're riding to town, Sheriff," the field chief said, resuming his native businesslike tone, "and we'll round up a posse to come out here to help you. Don't forget to go up and pick up Long Lem Carson. Bowman will get his cattle back, but Carson's still guilty of rustling. A few years in jail will teach him to stick to his cards and play them straight."

Reese stepped by the door to shake hands with Blaine Bowman, and the old rancher's face was flooded with gratitude. He could find no words in his full heart, but the look in his brimming eyes was ample reward for Steve Reese. The field chief clapped him on the back in farewell and walked on outside, his nose wrinkling involuntarily as Dusty Trail lighted a cigar.

"Shucks, Doc," Hank Ball said disgustedly, "ain't we goin' to say goodby to Stella?"

Steve Reese grinned, thinking of the big florid man in Austin who would be awaiting their return. By this time Colonel Beauvine had probably received other calls for aid from the far-flung membership of the CPA. If one of those calls hinted of danger and indicated that honest men were being persecuted by lawlessness, there would be another job waiting for Reese and his two trail partners.

Before the field chief could reply, Charlie Claw limped out on the Rocking T veranda and called to them.

"Hey, Reese! Ain't you and yore pards stayin' for my weddin'?"

Reese shook his head apologetically and waved to the brown-eyed marshal. As the man turned and went back inside, Reese looked at Hank Ball and chuckled.

"Why worry, Hank? You see she's going to be busy. We'll get a good meal, catch some sleep at the hotel and board the stage tonight. Maybe we'll ride this way again some time."

Hank kicked at a rock in his path and scowled at Dusty Trail's sly grin.

"You and yore seegars!" he grunted disdainfully.

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THE HERD FROM NOWHERE

A Steve Reese Novel by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

THE DEVIL'S EYE

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

When the grim spectre of drought stares at the settlers of Sun Bear Valley, Dal Baldwin prepares for a gun showdown!

STRIPPED to the waist, Dal Baldwin, first of the Sun Bear Valley settlers, glistened with sweat as he stood beside his comely wife, Mary, scanning the sere valley which now rippled in its sea of shimmering heat waves.

Drought had struck the valley, a valley to which Dal and Mary had come alone, some years ago—marking with their wagon tires, the first faint impressions that would lead subsequent homesteaders here, also. Together they had battled many vicissitudes—weather, hunger, fire, and the depredations of predatory animals and raiding men. But they had come through, to build up their home and raise two growing boys.

They had good neighbors, and they knew hope until the sun became a Devil's eye to glare fiendishly down for, it seemed, the whole of the last two years. Sun Bear creek was dry, and from Dal's irrigation flumes there trickled only sufficient water to moisten the muzzles of his handsome horse spread once each day and give the Baldwins barely enough for their own drinking and cooking.

North, at the homesteads of the Morrisons, Jud and his married son Jack, conditions were even worse. The Morrisons were watching handsome Angus pure blood cattle grow gaunt. Even from where they stood, the Baldwins could hear the incessant bawling of thirsty stock.

Suddenly Mary caught her husband's arm tightly, and pointed out along the north west trail. A rider was approaching, a small man forking a rangy high-withered work horse.

A faint smile parted Dal's rough lips. He always smiled when at any time he glimpsed his good neighbor, his first neighbor, little Doc Carson, approaching. That smile held both whimsy and affection, for in all the Sun Bear Valley country and the Valley Beyond, there was no man Dal would sooner have to side him than little Doc Carson who, with his angular, homely, quick tongued Marta, had come to the Baldwins when they needed neighbors very much.

DOC Carson drew rein and spat a stream of tobacco juice as if reluctant to part with the moisture. He dropped to the ground, his left leg sagging, as it habitually sagged because of an arthritic condition.

"How's, folks!" he called in his gravelly voice.

Dal started. Usually, Doc framed his greetings in a full, gold-capped toothy smile, an infectious grin. There was no grin this morning. He had ridden in from the direction of the Morrisons' half section.

"What's the news from the north neighbors, Doc?" Dal asked. "Are they sellin'?"

Doc made as if to send out another stream of tobacco juice, but changed his mind.

"Yeah," he answered. "Jud's lettin' a lot of stock go, and we can't blame him too much, Dal." Smoky lights came to cloud Doc's usually bright eyes. "The pity of it all is, they're bein' forced to sell, practically givin' good blood stock away, to a — a — Malotte!"

Both Dal and Mary Baldwin started, mouths parting at the mention of the name Malotte. It had been a Malotte who had caused them their first trouble here, when alone in the wild homestead hinterland. His name had been Quirt Malotte.

Dal ducked and pushed down on the plunger, just as Malotte's bullet knocked off his hat

"You're shore his name's—Malotte, Doc?" Dal asked. "Feller who was along to buy, or try to buy my hoss stock wasn't uh that name."

"He was hired by this feller Malotte, Dal, and it all don't add up to good huntin' to me. These buyin' jaspers claimed they was goin' to ship to the eastern packin' houses. But they ain't. They're holdin' stock along the river—Morrison stock and the Boxed D Herefords."

Dal gasped. So Dale Rankin, owner of the Boxed D ranch to westward, was selling, selling good cattle at a few dollars a head to a man who claimed he represented an eastern packing company. A — Malotte!

Dal turned gently to Mary, who nodded and moved off, to stand a moment beside her withered garden. Moisture gathered in a film over her eyes. She had worked hard over her garden, whose vegetables meant so much throughout the winter months. Leaves now curled and were crispy dry. Some plants, in a struggle to reproduce their kind before death struck them down, were sending up puny seed pods which would never mature.

Mary squared her shoulders and forced a smile as she turned to watch Dal and Doc seated close beside each other on a buck saw horse. They would think up something, surely, as they had done on other occasions. Surely they would find a way! Then Mary pulled the front of her sun bonnet lower, over her eyes as that great, glaring devil's eye, the sun, mocked her from above.

Dal Baldwin sprang suddenly to his feet, his mouth parted as he turned to Doc Carson.

"Your well's dry, Doc. My crick spring well's dry and I'm only gettin' a trickle from my deep springs which irrigate my land. It looks bad—bad indeed when a Malotte can come in and take advantage of my good neighbors durin' the drouth. Doc, I'm goin' to do somethin' about it."

"Yeah—Dal, boy." Doc cocked a shaded eye at the glaring sun. "Just what's in yore craw now?"

"I'm goin' to try to recover my springs."

Doc rose and caught his friend by the arm.

"A good idee, Dal," he said hoarsely. "But where at are you goin' to get well-drillin' rig from—pipe and power and all the rest of it?"

Dal Baldwin pointed to the south across the dry cracked creek bed. Beyond the creek were thirsty, blatting sheep, the stock of Tom Bruce who was also the valley blacksmith.

"Tom took over all my spare pipe that was left over after I enlarged my irrigation flumes, Doc," Dal said calmly. "Tom's got a haid on him. He's a dang good blacksmith. Have you forgot the power we had when we sawed our cut of lumber a couple of years back?"

SLOWLY Doc swung to stare glintingly at an old stationary engine housing. He licked a dribble of tobacco juice from his lower lip as if to conserve the moisture. Dal was right. They could get Fitzhugh to come in with his old steamer outfit, if Tom Bruce could rig up a drill. The idea was sound. But all at once Doc's little form shuddered. He shook his head and turned to Dal, his best friend.

"I—wal, Dal boy, I just remembered somethin'. Since the drouth hit us, Marta's been readin' up on some stuff in a 'cyclopedia, or almanac or somethin'. Seems like they's underground rivers which feeds springs. Pressure forces water into such springs as you've had for yore irrigation. Wal, they's also what's called faults—rock formations which, due to disturbances below, now and then slide and block, or slide and open up freeways. And it looks like that's what's happened here in the Sun Bear country because my well, yore's, the Morrisons, has dried up. See what I mean? They's been a—uh—wholesale underground activity that's drained everything."

Dal's cheek muscles were twitching sharply. There seemed to be a power of logic in Doc's theory taken from almanac or encyclopedia, or from whatever source, but suddenly Dal's face tightened again. He was no geologist but a practical man. He swung back to Doc, his eyes alive with animation.

"Be that as may, Doc," he said sharply, "I see no reason why we can't shake the devil out of things underground and mebbeso reblock streams or whatever is the source of my springs. I'm going out fightin', as I, as we, have always done. We've got powder cached, stumpin' powder. We'll rig our drill

and drop in charges, and blow the rock to blazes and mebbe rock somethin' loose that'll block our stream again. Yore theory may be okay, but it's the lack of spring freshets, snow in the mountains, that's caused the dryin' up of our crick and the swales.

"Now you go over and talk to Tom about the well riggin' for I'm riding out to see Dale Rankin at the Boxed D. He's got to stop sellin' his stock to that crooked wideloopin' jasper Malotte. By all hickory! I'd sooner shoot my hoss stock than sell a haid to Malotte!"

Doc Carson carefully removed a cud of eating tobacco from inside his cheek. He coughed raspingly. He was proud of his good friend Dal, and hesitated to argue with him, yet he couldn't see just what Dal had in mind. The situation at the Boxed D was serious, as it was at the Morrison pure blood cattle outfit. Doc himself could barely entice a couple of buckets of water a day from his own well. Now a sharp glinting light sprang to Doc's sunken, hazel eyes.

"Okay, Dal, I'm with you," he declared. "But what's on yore mind with regards to Rankin and the Boxed D? How can he hold his stock?"

"They's a river, north, a tributary to the Wood River, Doc. We'll rig up all the tank wagons we can and haul water, if we have to spend all our time—those who ain't at the well drillin'. We'll haul enough water to keep the Boxed D shorthorns and Morrison stock until—until—" Dal broke off, shrugging.

Doc was fidgeting on his bent leg. He was alive, stirred by the spirit of this new desire for fight expressed by Dal, the first settler of Sun Valley who had done more to lead and guide his neighbors than any other man.

"Right, Dal," Doc said. "I'm goin' right over to Tom's now. You git those wagons rigged. Yep, you're right. We'll make a fight of 'er, like—like we've allus done!"

Dal Baldwin was smiling as he strode to a corral to catch up and saddle a horse. He would lead, drive, direct the fight and in the back of his mind was a scheme to recover the stock already sold to the crooked Malotte. The very name Malotte brought Dal's hackles up like those of a snarling battle wolf. Shortly afterward he was riding over the now sere range, headed for the Boxed D outfit.

WHEN Dal arrived, he found his friend Dale Rankin thinner, gaunt, worried. He watched, with Rankin, choice Hereford stock roaming restlessly, bawling for water. Cowhands rode out continuously searching for some hidden springs or water holes.

The range alongside the Bear River was tightly leased, Rankin had discovered, but when Baldwin broached the subject of tanking in water, the old rancher was at once interested.

"That'll work, Dal boy. They's such a thing in the law books as riparian rights, or some such legal stuff. We'll git the tanks rollin'. I got two that could be put to use right off—my round-up tanks. Mebbeso, Tom Bruce could help my boys rig up a couple more. You and the Morrisons could let us have extra teams."

Together in silence they turned and studied the far, towering mountains and lower foothills which for years had never failed as watersheds. They saw the belts of spruce, lodgepole pine, aspen and birch, often destroyed by fire, but always throwing out seedlings to reproduce the desolated areas. It didn't seem logical that a mountainous range country could for long suffer drouth. Surely the big snows would return and force the freshets down into the creeks and sloughs.

But this was a time for action and Dal turned to his rancher friend again. He explained his plan to attempt to relocate his springs. He spoke of his defiance of the buyer Malotte.

"But what are you goin' to do, Baldwin?" Rankin asked. "Let yore wonderful hoss stock just grow ga'nter and ga'nter, and die afore yore eyes?"

"I'm goin' to fight my way out, Dale," Baldwin replied sharply. "At least I'm goin' to fight and I want you all to side me. This country bloomed and bore for thousands of years afore I first struck the valley. Nothin' can make me believe it'll dry up and puff out all of a sudden, now. We could set around and dry and puff out along with the grass and water, Dale, but not for me. I want yore tanks. I'll see more are made available. They's water in a river you can't drive yore cattle to, so we'll bring in enough water to keep the cows from dyin' until—until—" Dal broke off, shrugging, as was his custom when out of words.

Rankin reached out a hand and closed

his gnarled fingers on one of Dal's shoulders.

"I've seen the time when I hated the very whiskers of nesters, homestaiders, Baldwin," he said huskily, "but since comin' up here, and meetin' with you and sidin' you in many a struggle and fight, I've l'arned aplenty. Now let's git started buckin' this drouth. I'm glad you told me this widelooper Malotte is plumb crooked and doesn't represent an Eastern packin' outfit at all. That'll make things easier when the time comes for a showdown, a settlement, as it shorely will because, Baldwin, I learned that it's Malotte who's leased all the range along the Bear River!"

"What!" Dal's eyes seemed in danger of bugging from their sockets but he essayed no further comment. The veins stood out at his temples as he turned to fork his horse.

"I'll expect two tanks ready tomorrow, Dale," he said. "I'll skin the first outfit myself. So long, for now, and have your boys steamed up."

Dal clucked to his little chestnut and started her into a sharp trot and as he rode back to his valley homestead his heart seemed to catch fire with the spirit of the fight ahead. He would call in at the Morrisons' place on the way home and spark Jud and Jack to action, as in days gone by he had fanned a flame in their hearts when disaster threatened in the frontier homestead land they so vigorously worked and carved for the children they would leave behind to seize upon the great heritage of the pioneers.

BACK at the valley, with the help of Boxed D cowhands, men toiled in the fierce sun, or in the twilight hours, building huge water troughs for the Morrison place and the Boxed D. With Doc Carson's aid, Tom Bruce at once went to work on well drill rigging. He had sufficient borax and charcoal for whatever welding might be required. Dal had gotten in touch with Fitzhugh, an Irish-American, who loved a fight. Fitz had promised immediate action with his portable steamer outfit—the outfit which had sawn the log cut for the settlers so recently.

This morning Dal had an hour to spare. He was watching the well crew at the springs. Tom Bruce's outfit was working and Doc Carson strutted proudly up and down as the improvised drill and augur outfit sank lower and lower. But suddenly they struck rock, an the air was turned a smoky, sulphurous blue as Fitzhugh thundered. But it was Dal who came to the rescue with a suggestion that they at once start blasting.

The following morning Fitzhugh had barely touched off a powerful charge of powder in the drill hole when Dal glimpsed a pair of riders bearing down on his homestead. Dal nudged Doc Carson.

"That lead rider's a ringer for Quirt Malotte, Doc," he said.

"That's right, Dal, and why not! He's the Malotte jasper who's tryin' a squeeze play on you-all here. But let's hear him sound off."

The riders turned in and the leader, a thick-set, dark-visaged man grinned and nodded.

"Havin' a mite of trouble, boys?" he said."

"Not any more'n we can git out of, stranger," Baldwin replied. "You're Malotte, ain't you?"

"That's right. A not onfamiliar name, I'm shore."

Dal winced sharply, but he held himself in control.

"You got some business palaver to talk?" he asked.

"If'n you're Baldwin, as I figger you are, I got some news for you," the man replied. "You been haulin' water in from Bear River."

"Right, Malotte. And come tomorrow mornin', we'll be startin' four tank wagons on the haul. Does that mean anythin'?"

A strange smile on the other's face cut Dal off.

"Not much to me, Baldwin, but I got some news that'll mean plenty to you. It'll make you wish you'd sold out yore hoss stock when my buyer made you an offer. Come nightfall, yore trail into the river'll be fenced. They'll be a sign posted, so you won't make no foolish mistakes. Drop around and see me when you've changed yore mind about sellin'. Only my price now is seventeen dollars a haid."

He swung his horse and spurred him before Dal could retort. Little Doc Carson picked up a monkey wrench in his big-knuckled right hand. Fitzhugh took his hand off the engine's throttle lever

and strode up to Dal who stood immobile, only his twitching cheek muscles showing any sign of animation.

"That cattle-rustlin' sidewinder's got a hatful of aces stacked ag'in you, Dal," Fitz said bitterly. "Just what do you figure to do now?"

Dal swung, his eyes flashing fierce lights into the fighting lights of the Irishman's green eyes.

"What would you do, Fitz? Don't answer. I know. We swing up with the four tank outfits as planned. You carry on here and git some good cores to bring us some joy. Keep churnin' that ol' augur outfit and pour the powder to 'er if you strike more rock. There's water below, lots of it, and there's plenty of water in Bear River."

Fitzhugh turned to the snorting engine and pulled his whistle cord wide, sending out a screech of defiance Malotte and his henchman could not help but hear as they rode along their back trail.

SKINNING a four-horse team hitched to a heavy tank wagon, Dal Baldwin led north toward the Bear river the following morning. He had always liked the peaceful way of extricating himself and his neighbors from trouble, but now he was prepared to fight it out if necessary, feeling sure that any court of law would help him and the Sun Bear Valley folk against such a sidewinder as Malotte and his outfit.

Jaded horses snuffled as they tanged the scent of sweet water, but as Dal turned them into the dark rut trail the pioneer tank wagons had made. Suddenly he straightened his back. Malotte had not been bluffing. There, ahead, tacked to an aspen tree was a NO TRAIL BEYOND THIS POINT sign and strung to the trees were two strands of barbed wire.

Dal dropped to the ground, swiftly joined by the skinners of the other outfits—young fighting rannies from the Boxed D. A ranch hand brought along a heavy set of pliers, but Dal laid a heavy hand on his arm.

"Not yet, Carter," he said quietly. "Let's you and me just take a look-see around—do a bit of skunk-huntin'."

Dal turned and spoke to the other men.

"Hang and rattle, boys," he called. "Hold yore hands and don't start anythin'. Set tight till we get back. . ."

With Carter siding him, he crawled under the lower strand of wire and moved on.

Approaching the river zone they saw nothing of Malotte's men, but when at last they reached the river, Dal's eyes widened as he halted. There was plenty of water at this point, where the river made a wide, sweeping curve. But what arrested Dal's attention more was cattle movement across the creek. A number of riders were herding cattle down to a flat to drink—handsome blooded Morrison Angus stock and Dale Rankin's Herefords—stock picked up for a song. Some of the Morrison breeder stock would have fetched hundreds of dollars apiece from Eastern buyers. Jud had sold it at less than twenty-two a head.

"Durned litter of slinkin' coyotes," Dal swore. He turned to Carter and pointed: "See yore Boxed D stock, boy!" he said. "We're goin' to recover that stock if'n I have to squeeze the very heart plumb out uh Malotte. He claimed he was buyin' stock for a Eastern packin' outfit which had been subsidized by the Government to help the settlers through the drouth period. Instead, he's just a dirty wideloopin' crook, workin' a trick on his own. But come on. I want to examine that line of willows that runs south from the big river bend there."

Under cover, Dal Baldwin and Carter moved in on the willow line where Dal's nostrils fluted as he snorted as if elated at some sudden, poignant discovery.

"Just what I thought, Carter," he said. "Just exactly what I—lookit! This is an old draw—once a crick which fed the lodgepole swales south."

"Uh, you mean this crick was blocked, that it flowed ag'in. Baldwin, steady down. Cricks most generally flow into a river, not out of it. What *do* you mean . . . ?"

"This was once a crick that flowed out of a river, Carter, a crick dug by pretty clever engineers, the beavers that wanted water for floatin' their logs in and around the timber belts south."

"So it was a crick, but it's a dry wash now," Carter said grumpily. "What good does it do us?"

A GRIN parted Dal's lips as he pointed to the junction where the

old creek and the river met at the big bend.

"It's blocked, Carter. Beavers was trapped out by the Injuns. Driftwood and silt swirlin' down with freshets plugged it up. So—we blow the block! We return the water to the swamps, the swales, and Jud Morrison has a backlog of water for his stock and so has the Boxed D, at least enough until our supply returns, as it shorely will."

"You mean we come up here an—uh—just naturally blow that block out right under the noses of them wideloop jaspers, and—uh—" Carter broke off swallowing hard, then added sharply: "Then why didn't you say so right off? Let's go so's we can get organized." But Dal laid a restraining hand on the young redhead's arm.

"Not so fast and so easy, son," he said. "To git water back into those dogwood and lodgepole pine swales isn't as easy as that. And it would be plumb foolish to tip our hands to Malotte. We're goin' back and cut fence. We want to give those rustlin' owlhooters the idea we're desperate. We'll likely be jumped afore we can fill our tanks, but be that as it may, we're rollin' those wagons on down to the river, sabe?"

Carter grinned wide.

"Heap sabe, pardner. Lead off, and don't shake 'er too easy, I'm sp'ilin' for some action."

Not concerned with the law or consequences Dal himself snicked the wire and let the wagon outfits through. He had insisted that his party come up this morning unarmed for he didn't figure Malotte and his outfit would start any shooting—killing shooting. But as he rode ahead atop his lead tank Dal was not unprepared for any emergency. At the spang of a rifle bullet overhead, he dropped swiftly to the ground, in cover.

Bullets thumped sharply into the tanks as their skinners took cover on the far sides.

Carter crawled up alongside Dal, his shirt sleeve torn on the nigh side.

"You see, Dal," he said bitterly. "Fitz was plumb right this mornin'. We should've packed our guns. Cripes! I might have lost an arm!"

Dal grinned. But now a thick voice was calling. Some of Malotte's riders had crossed the river and were in.

"Stand up and show yoreself, Baldwin," the booming voice commanded. Carter attempted to press Dal down, but the big first settler of Sun Bear Valley rose and strode out from in back of the tank to face a heavy-set rider who had a Winchester carbine trained on him.

"Okay, mister," Dal said calmly. "You got the drop. Now what do we all do? I don't want none of my men hurt. It was me planned the water raid. Speak yore piece."

"We know you ain't packin' guns, Baldwin," the rider said gruffly. "Somehow wished you was. Onhitch yore outfits—leavin' the tanks and ridin' the hosses back. We'd take over the hosses too, on'y Malotte figgers it'll hurt you more if'n you have the extry stock on yore hands. On the way out, git them pliers workin' and fix that fence. *Vamos* now and for the future—don't try nothing foolish like this ag'in. That's the last warnin' you git, *sabe?*"

Dal looked into a pair of fiery dark eyes and nodded.

"*Sabe,*" he said, but his mind was filled with his plan, his climactic plan to get water through the Malotte fence unaided by the tank outfit. He was hoping, with a heavy heart, that Doc and Tom and Fitzhugh were having better success with their drilling for the relocation and recovery of those valuable springs would mean so much to Dal and also to the other settlers.

As Dal turned to rejoin his friends, he was surprised to see a broad grin on Carter's face. It revealed the true character of the old frontier cowhand. A moment or so ago Carter had been sour, bitter, but now in the face of this setback, he was smiling, fully decided upon siding the big, gritty first settler of Sun Bear Valley.

They unhitched and left their tank outfits behind them. Meticulously, as Malotte's men watched, Dal himself made repairs to the fence. They mounted the work horses and rode on, while the great red sun continued to glare mockingly down like the eye of the very devil himself.

DOC CARSON was the first to glimpse the sixteen-horse outfit coming swinging along the trail past the little schoolhouse. He flung up his arms and bellowed to Fitzhugh, who came striding from the snorting old steamer.

"Somethin' bad's blowed for Dal and the boys, Fitz," he boomed. "But don't

you sound off none. I know you advised Dal to pack guns, but let's hear Dal's side. Mebbeso the wet cores we got to show him'll cheer him up some. Eh-h-h —he's shore played his cards square in the years we been buckin' this frontier. I hope Malotte ain't outplayed him from a cold deck."

Fitz closed off his engine throttle as the men rode up. Swiftly Dal Baldwin gave his story and spoke of his plans to blow the old beaver creek blockade. When he told of the ambush, Fitz started to talk, but Doc Carson slyly jabbed him in the ribs with the handle of a heavy monkey wrench.

Suddenly Dal's eyes widened. He was looking at the rock and clay recently pulled up by the drill augur. He rushed in, dropped to his knees and picked up a couple of handfuls of mucky clay.

"You—you're gettin' there, Fitz," he said excitedly.

Fitz nodded, but there was no smile on his face.

"Gettin' there, shore, Dal, but we're runnin' out of pipe. Tom's used up his whole stock. If'n we don't strike force water within twenty feet—and we're into porous rock now—then—" He broke off, shrugging and Doc Carson's face as a mask of expressionless gloom as he stared at Dal as if to confirm Fitzhugh's uncompleted statement of defeat. But Baldin smiled softly, rubbing the wet muck in his hands. He turned to consider his flumes, his irrigation flumes from which pipes ran—pipes to the fringes of his oats and alfalfa field, to his dry water troughs and to his garden.

"Pipe?" he said softly. "Why they's enough pipe around to take you down to oil, boys, let alone down to water. Doc, you're slippin' some." He rubbed a muddy palm gently into Doc's whiskered face. "You should have knowed that whatever pipe I have is available. Use her.

"But now we've got to plan, take stock of our powder and get ready. I'm goin' to fill those dogwood swales with water. We're goin' to be able to fill tanks from this side uh the Malotte wire if'n I have to blow Malotte an' his whole dang litter uh kiotes to — uh —"

Dal broke off sharply. A soft little cough had sounded. He swung, to look into the sweet face of Mary, his wife, who linked an arm in his and led him on down toward the house. Back at the drill outfit, Doc Carson's eyes moistened as he grinned wide, displaying his full set of gold-capped teeth. Of all the womenfolk in the valley, apart from the sharp-tongued Marta, there was none for whom little Doc had so deep an affection as he held for Mary Baldwin.

As Dal strode on with Mary, he seemed no longer to hear the dry nickerings of thirsty horses at the corrals, nor the distant bawling of the Morrison cattle, nor the weak blatting of Tom Bruce's sheep across the creek. His eyes were cast skyward, focused on a small dark cloud which moved like a patch momentarily to cover that glaring red devil's eye.

As they approached the stoop, Dal slid an arm about his wife's waist and hugged her firmly and his two young sons, idling near by, looked up, grinning. Of late, they had begun to wonder.

DUSK had barely settled on the hot valley when the men, gathered at the well drill workings, were surprised by a visit from Malotte and the big jasper who had jumped Dal up at the tank wagons.

"You notice we ain't fenced ag'in coyotes, Malotte," Dal said gruffly. "You ain't any more welcome than they are. *Vamos!*"

Malotte dismounted. He wore a new cerise-colored silk shirt with bandana to match and the bottoms of his jeans were encased in handsomely-tooled boots.

He moved in to examine the clay taken out of the drill hole, as Baldwin strode up to him.

"I said for you to hightail!" Dal called.

Malotte shrugged, turning.

"Okay, homestaider, okay. I just come down to make you a final offer for yore stock. You'd better not forgit I'm a stock buyer an' not a — coyote." He turned, grinning as he glared down at the mucky drill coring, but suddenly his face lost its grin as he swung round on the settlers and Fitzhugh.

The big Irishman shrugged and turned to carry on with his work capping powder fuses. Completely ignored, Malotte mounted and with his gunman rode off.

Dal's party of powder men were ready

to ride when Doc Carson approached him.

"I—I got a sudden misery on me, Dal," Carson said raspingly. "Danged thing's cussin' my j'ints aplenty. If'n it's all the same to you I'll stay back with Fitz here and—uh—"

Doc broke off, turning away as if he realized from the smile in Dal's eyes that his big friend understood he was lying. Dal patted his shoulder and looked down at the heavy old single action Colt slung low on Doc's right thigh.

"Reckon you're wearin' ol' Betsy to spirit away the art'ritis misery, huh, Doc?" he asked, laughing. He turned to tighten a cinch, and soon was heading his column on into the deepening night.

As he rode on, Dal halted now and then, cocking his head toward the northwest, from which horizon there seemed to come a grumble of thunder, but he shook his head, sighing and rode on into action at the old beaver draw.

Swiftly the men went to work—swiftly and silently. Baldwin charged his dynamite sticks with the detonators already fused. Carter, of the Boxed D ranch, had attached himself to Dal's party. He chuckled softly, but there was no mirth in his chuckle.

"I don't like Fitz and Doc and Tom Bruce bein' left alone at the well workin's, Dal," Carter said. "And I don't like things here. It's too quiet. I watched that owlhooter Molette when he called on us—the grin on his face, like he was wise to somethin'. Mebbeso that's why Doc—"

Dal turned away to give directions to a group of men who packed, beside their guns, grubhoes and axes and shovels. There was mucking and clearing to do along the draw.

"Scratch 'er as clean as you can, boys," Dal encouraged. "Stan' by for my fire call. I'll give you lots of warnin'. When she blows, she'll be like a kettle lid poppin' off." He reached back, took another stick and fuse from Carter and placed it in its coyote hole, tamping it firmly with the heel of a boot.

Within an hour his charges were all laid, and leads connected to the stumping battery back a piece. Dal was moving with the main lead wire in his hand along the draw when suddenly a stab of flame momentarily blinded him. Came the attendant crack of rifle fire. Bullets whined overhead.

Dal flattened. He was quickly joined by Carter who spoke to him, but Dal assured the man he was okay.

"Then why are we lyin' around here?" Carter asked huskily. "Why don't we snake around them lead slingers. Some of us could do it while you touch off the shoot."

"Good idea, Carter. I can't blow 'er until the draw's cleared. You gather up some of the Boxed D hands and swing around in back. Keep your ears open for my fire warnin'. And have this in mind—I want that jasper Malotte in on the hoof, *sabe*?"

"*Sabe*, Dal. So long, and luck!"

Carter eased himself out of the draw, touched one of his friends with the toe of a boot and then moved through the adjacent breaks to gather up a posse.

IN A clearing Dal Baldwin was hunkered down beside the plunger battery waiting, waiting for an all clear signal from Dale Rankin who ramrodded the clearing of the draw. All at once he was surprised, startled by a thick voice at his back. It was the voice of Malotte.

"Reach, homestaider!" the voice commanded.

Dal's heart pounded sharply. His brain acted quickly, though. His hands started to rise, then suddenly his deep baritone voice thundered out the fire call—the warning to his friends.

"F—I—R—R—E !"

He jerked down his hands as a bullet knocked off his hat. The plunger lever sank and he dived head foremost into the brush. A second shot blasted, but its echoes were short-lived, drowned by the thunderous detonation as the mound of blocking rubble at the beaver creek's source erupted in a sky-bent mass of rubble.

Dal spun at the sharp crackle of brush. He heard voices. It was when he coiled around a willow bush that he realized for the first time he'd been hit—hit high in his right thigh.

Scarcely breathing, he crouched while the earth-bound rock, clay and logs from the shoot pounded in on every quarter. Now Dal heard a whispered voice. He peered through a port in the willows. His eyes must have showed for as he ducked a gun flashed. Dal's own gun barked and a man spread-

eagled out in the draw—the old draw already about to feel, for the first time in years, the powerful rush of water.

Dal eased himself over the rim of the old creek. A man's back was to him.

"M-a-l-o-t-t-e!" he breathed. It was Malotte! He spun, but not because he heard Dal, but because Dale Rankin and his crew were coming along the cleared draw.

Gun drawn, Dal jerked forward, regardless of the pain in his leg. Malotte fired, but his bullet went wide as Dal threw down.

Malotte spilled, but he still had strength left to squeeze his trigger. Baldwin spun and pitched forward, striking the side of his head against the bole of an alder sapling. He sank slowly to the ground, scarcely conscious of the crack of sporadic gunfire, the sound of men's voices, or the sound of rushing water in the reclaimed beaver creek.

Dal came to, tasting water.

"Drink her, Baldwin, Dale Rankin urged. "It's water from yore new crick."

Dal was helped to a sitting position.

"What about Malotte?" he asked. "And what happened to me? I'm sort of foggy, like I should still be out. My haid—it hurts."

"You was only creased, Dal," Carter answered, chuckling. "Shucks, I'm hit worse'n you. You got a nick in the haid and then bashed it ag'in a alder trunk. But, Dal, we got the boss owlhooter all tied up for you, ready to ride on to yore place on a tank of good water. And listen, *listen!*"

A crash of mountain thunder sounded. Dal started as lightning flashed. He felt a spot of rain on his face, a face that split in a wide grin. The night was cool, cooler than usual.

"It seems like little ol' Doc should be here to offer up a prayer of thanksgivin'," Dal said softly. "The rain won't amount to nothin' . . Little shower, mebbe, but it he'ps a lot. Main thing is we got good water for the catch basin at the swales, and we'll hold it. Now I wonder what Mr. Malotte's goin' to say when I play my last ace?"

"What's that, Baldwin?" Rankin asked.

Dal's answer was drowned out by sharp thunder. He gave directions to get started for home. Teams must be brought up to retrieve the tanks.

"Have a few of your hands round up the wounded, both sides, Dale," Dal said of Rankin. "I'll send up to Cody for the deputy marshal to come on down. We'll do the rest uh this legal. Now help me fork my hoss. I've got to git back to little Doc. He'll be bouncin' around like a hunk of beefsteak in a Irish stew."

HAPPILY Doc Carson was bouncing around. He was strutting a little hippety-hopped dance in the rain, with Mary Baldwin for his partner—not so much for the coming of the rain, but because the springs had popped wide open. Dal Baldwin's cherished irrigation springs had at last been recovered—recovered by a terrific blast of dynamite when Fitzhugh used up the last of the settlers' stumping supplies. Water poured out over the land.

It was thus Dal Baldwin found his friends and his wife who rushed to help him to the ground.

"Dal, darling," Mary said brokenly. "You're—you're hurt badly?"

"I'm hurt so little I'm ashamed, Mary honey," Dal answered. "I—the springs. They're—" He chuckled, almost hysterically and attempted to break away from Mary's arms, but she held him firmly while more than rain water coursed down his face. He could taste the salt tang of tears, and was glad of the darkness.

Two days later, all settlers gathered at the Baldwin home. With them was good friend Frank Synes, deputy marshal. Seated in the main living room, his dark face now pale from his wounds, was Malotte.

"You're bein' offered a chance to git off light, Malotte," the deputy said gruffly. "By the good graces of Dal Balwin and his friends, who should have hanged you, you're bein' offered yore money back for all the stock you bought through misrepresentation. Take 'er or leave 'er. You leave 'er, and I'm turnin' you over to the Boxed D cowhands. Make up yore mind *muy pronto!*"

Malotte glowered at Baldwin, who smiled back, and shrugged. Dal was not concerned, save for his neighbors. He had sold no stock. But now he spoke:

"You had some sort of cousin who come here years back and tried a curly wolf play on us, Malotte," he said in his calm, meaningful drawl. "He wound up where he belonged—six feet under

the aspen roots. Always, we've played a square game here at the valleys. We play square, or we fight! You return those cattle to their owners, at the price you paid them, or by the living—uh—" Again, Dal felt Mary's hand on his arm.

Malotte licked his thick lips.

"Okay. You win, Balwin," he said slowly, weakly. "I'll give a bill of sale the marshal can witness. You've won out all around—got yore springs back, water into the dogwood swales. You can hang on now even if the freshets fail you a couple uh more years. I've been at other dry ranges where—where the folks folded up: had no courage to fight like you folk fought. I'll sign. Mebbeso—who knows—you and I'll have a chance to toss the dice ag'in, huh?"

Dal started.

"I don't go lookin' for trouble, Malotte," he answered softly. "I'm lazy thataway. I let trouble come to me and when it does, wal—you see what happens? I got friends who side me right when death faces 'em right in the eye. We don't let nothin' stop us, not even that glarin' eye of the devil which parched our land for two years.

"We fight and that's how America was made and will continue to be developed. 'Course, now and then, someone has to take time out to tromp out nests of sidewinders and then—go on. You'd best take a tip and move into some other land and git yoreself a job instead of roamin' the range like a curly wolf or—one day, somebody's goin' to elevate his sights and drill you plumb through the black heart."

Dal got to his feet and limped to the open door.

The sun was still shining, but gone was that evil red glare. In the corrals a bunch of young colts and fillies romped, romped on soil that was no longer hard caked, and when they whinnied in their play, their voice sounds were fresh, clear: not the cracked and dried voices of suffering creatures.

Dal moved on and was joined by Mary. Together they stood by the edge of the garden where vegetation had taken on a new lease of life.

"It'll be a short crop for you this year, honey," Dal said. "But somebody once said a half a loaf is better'n no bread at all, huh?"

Mary lifted her sweet face and Dal kissed her warmly—good compensation for both when another frontier battle was won.

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TROUBLE Makes a Bid

By DAN KIRBY

Lafe lowered his bullet head and lashed out at Cassity with hamlike fists

The struggling nesters of Hartshorn find a fighting champion in Roe Cassity when bitter price war rages!

THE stage wheeled into Hartshorn stopping briefly at the rust colored adobe station so that Roe Cassity, the lone passenger, could get off. The station agent tossed the mail packet to the driver, and the stage rolled on, leaving Cassity standing in the rocky, wheel-torn street. Watching the stage fade away, Roe Cassity wished he was on it, for he had little liking for the job ahead.

The grayhaired stage agent hooked a thumb under a single gallus and asked sociably, "Yuh lookin' for someone in particular, young feller? I know most everybody in this here town."

Cassity set down his leather-backed suitcase and reached in his coat pocket for tobacco and matches. He was a tall, slim-hipped man, cool-eyed, and with a stubborn slant to his lean jaw. He was a man who made his living off the troubles and failures of his fellow men, and the profession had trademarked him with a toughness that the gray checked suit and beaver hat could not hide.

Cassity touched a match to his hand-rolled cigarette. "I'm lookin' for E. J. Brock," he said.

The agent scratched his chin with the stub of a pencil, his brow furrowed in thought. "E. J. Brock, eh? I know some Brocks around here. Lemme see — that E. J. kind of throws me."

"It throwed me, too," Cassity said with unsmiling quietness. "It stands for Ella Jean, Ella Jean Brock."

Recognition flooded the old man's face. He smiled happily. "Why, shore now, Ella Jean is old Julius Brock's gal. The old man died here a few months back, but you can find the gal at the Brock General Store across the street. It ain't open because Ella Jean went outa business last week, cuss the Goads' onery hides."

A big, barrel-bodied man appeared around the corner of the building. He looked at Cassity then at the oldster, his eyes cold slits in his fleshy face.

"Harvey," he said flatly, "that long tongue is gonna talk yuh into a heap of trouble some day."

The old agent's face paled beneath the whisker stubble and he gulped nervously. "Aw now, Lafe, I was just answering the stranger's questions. I —"

"Shut up," the big man turned to Cassity. "I'll answer the stranger's questions in short order." He stuffed a wad of rough cut inside his mouth and wiped a sleeve across his heavy lips. "I'm Lafe Goad. Me and my brother Frank own the Goad Grocery and Mercantile store down the street. If yuh got any idees about buying the Brock store yuh might oughta' know that competition don't seem to get along in this town. Besides, me and Frank are makin' a deal for that store."

ROE Cassity checked the anger that beat against him with the sound of the big man's harsh words. He flipped his cigarette into the dust and ground it carefully beneath his heel.

He said softly, "Friend, I'm mighty grateful for all that good advice, but I think you're a little confused. Any deal you make for the Brock store will have to be made with me."

The big storekeeper blinked. He stared at Cassity a long moment, then a slow, mirthless grin stretched his coarse lips.

"I got yuh pegged now, stranger," he said with satisfaction. "Yuh're that auctioneer gent Frank said was coming up here to sell the Brock gal out." The man's grin faded and cold anger crept into his eyes. "Yuh figger on jacking the price up on that store? I've seen yore kind work before. Frank and I wouldn't like that, stranger. We been workin' all year to get ahold of that store and we aim to buy it at our price. The Brock gal has got to talk our language now, being as how she's busted. We wouldn't take kindly to yore meddlin' in this deal."

A tight grin set itself on Cassity's flat lips. "I heard on the stage that a shyster lawyer and a fat storekeeper were puttin' on a price war here in Hartshorn tryin' to run a girl out of business," he said. "I heard she gave better'n she took as long as her money held out. You and your brother might feel proud of breakin' the girl. You might consider yourselves big men in this town, but where I come from we've got another name for you— and it ain't pretty."

Anger and surprise stamped itself on Lafe Goad's face. "Mister," he said thickly, "nobody talks to me like that. I was figurin' to ask yuh to leave town, but now I aim to run yuh out." He moved on Cassity swiftly in spite of his great bulk, arms widespread and dangling, like a great ape.

A little chill went along Cassity's spine as the big man moved toward him. He was better than fair at boxing and would have had little fear of Lafe Goad in a stand-up, straight, knuckle-and-skull fist-fight. But once let Lafe get those great arms around Cassity's back Roe would have about the same chance as he would fighting a grizzly bear.

Lafe lowered his bullet head and lashed out with a hamlike fist, at the same time seeking to grasp Cassity's arm with his other hand. Cassity raised his suitcase, fending off the crushing blow that ripped the luggage from his grasp. Lafe snarled with pain as the hard leather scraped skin from his knuckles.

Roe Cassity moved inside Lafe's flailing arms like an elusive shadow. His left hand jabbed the big man's head back sharply, and his right hand shot out like a coiled diamond-back to bury itself deep in the storekeeper's soft stomach. Lafe doubled over, face white with anguish.

Cassity might have whittled Lafe down with his fists, but he had neither the time nor the inclination to take the chance. He stepped back and brought his knee up hard to the big man's chin. Lafe Goad came apart at the seams. His arms

went limp, and his head lolled on his chest. For a moment he teetered unsteadily, then fell heavily on his face.

The station agent's jaw sagged unbelievingly. "Great Jehoshaphat! Nobody ever treated Lafe Goad like that before." He blinked uncertainly. "Who might yuh be, stranger?"

Roe Cassity picked up his leather suitcase and dusted it carefully. He set the beaver hat at just the proper angle and shrugged the coat more snugly about his broad shoulders.

"Cassity's my name, friend. Roe Cassity, auctioneer. I'm here on behalf of the Brock creditors to take over the store."

The stage agent grinned. "Me, I wish yuh were here to take over the town. Lafe Goad and that lawyer brother of his, Frank, are gettin' hard to stomach."

An hour after Cassity checked into the local hotel he stepped out into the street and headed for the Brock General Store a hundred yards away. A stiff white shirt had replaced the stage soiled gray one, and a black frock coat draped his lean figure with a look of grave dignity that was belied by the cool insolence of his eyes.

In a country of dust, sweat and sudden violence, of high heel boots and flannel shirts, Roe Cassity took pains to be fastidious about his dress. His clothes attracted attention, and attracting the attention of people was part of Cassity's business.

He came to the Brock store, a gaunt, gray building with a padlock dangling through the rusty hasp of the closed front door. He turned and went around the building toward the back. The back door was open, and he could hear movement inside. He knocked.

A girl appeared in the doorway. She was young, probably in her middle twenties, Cassity guessed, and she was pretty. Not beautiful, he thought critically, but pretty even in the plain gingham dress and with her yellow hair piled hastily on top of her head.

Cassity tipped his beaver hat and said quietly, "I'm Roe Cassity. You have a letter from the Murphy Wholesalers advising that they were sending me here to take over. I don't like it any more than you. Had I known that E. J. Brock was a woman, I would have declined the job. The stage driver informed me after it was too late to turn back."

The girl's face flushed. She stepped back from the door and said stiffly, "You can come in if you want. It's your store now. I'm just batching here."

HE went inside and surveyed the long, single room cut off from the rest of the store by a thin plank wall. There was a stove on one side of the room, a bed on the other. There was a table and two chairs in the middle.

In spite of the bare furnishings, the room held an atmosphere of femininity. Cassity sat down in a chair, feeling uncomfortable and ill at ease. Selling out a woman did not rest easy with the big auctioneer. Ella Jean Brock took the chair on the other side of the table. She looked at Cassity evenly.

"My Dad did business here for fifteen years," she told him. "When he died I took over, but a price-cutting war broke me. I owe the Murphy Wholesalers two thousand dollars and my stock will invoice over half of that. The fixtures and building will perhaps make up the difference with enough left over to get me out of town."

Cassity caught the bitterness in her voice. "This price cutting war, what started it?" he said. "What's behind it?"

The girl shook her head. "Lafe Goad started it over a year ago. I don't know what the idea was, except that I'm sure his brother Frank put him up to it. Frank owns half of Lafe's store, but Lafe does all the work while Frank pretends to practise law. Maybe Frank Goad figures that with only one store in Hartshorn they can name their own price for their goods. Sometimes I think he wanted to break me so he could get the nester trade."

"Frank used to talk down about the farmers, but he changed his tune a while back. He's been going out of his way to do little favors for them recently and suggesting that they trade at his store, but the nesters remember he was against them when they had their trouble with the cattlemen. They don't trust him. I do all the farmer trade. Not that it's worth anything. I've got fifteen hundred dollars on my books now. They're broke and can't pay."

Cassity's lips puckered in a soundless whistle. "Fifteen hundred in worthless accounts? No wonder you're broke. You were foolish to trust them."

The girl turned on him sharply. "That's

my business, Mister Cassity. Your company will get what's coming to them and I'm not asking any favors for myself. The farmers were hit hard in the range war. They held on but they were broke. Now that they're back to raising crops they'll come out of it — if they can find a market. It doesn't matter how fine your crops are if you can't market them."

Cassity shrugged. "You seem more worried about their troubles than your own. That's your business, too, I reckon."

The girl looked away. "I don't worry any more. It doesn't do any good. I understand from the wholesalers' letter that the sale will be tomorrow noon. Go ahead with it. I'll have my things out of here before then."

Cassity nodded. He was just stepping out the door when a tall, thin-shouldered man rounded the corner of the store. He was in his early forties, Cassity judged, and there was a crafty, restless look in his deep-set eyes that somehow distorted the smile on his colorless lips.

Ella Jean had followed Cassity to the door. "What do you want around here, Frank Goad?" she said sharply.

The thin man's smile widened into a loose grin. "Why, now, Ella, I heard from Lafe that your gentleman friend here is selling this store at auction. Of course, Lafe and me hate to see you goin' out of business, but since it's got to be that way, I figured to look over your stock. We might consider a bid on it ourselves."

"Frank Goad," the girl said huskily, "you're the smoothest talking liar in New Mexico. You aren't sorry to see me out of business. It's what you've planned for the past year. But don't get any ideas about buying this store. It will take a fair bid to buy it, and fairness isn't in you."

The lawyer's face paled. "That's hard talk, Ella Jean, especially since you haven't got any say left. I'll put it to the gentleman. Have I got a right to look over the stock?"

Some of the girl's anger and distrust of the thin man seeped into Cassity. "No," he said flatly, "you haven't. The assets will be listed on the auction bill. They'll be passed out this evening. The sale comes off tomorrow noon and it'll be for cash to the highest bidder. If you're interested you can have your say then."

The lawyer's eyes fell coldly on Cassity. "Maybe you're right, stranger." He said softly, "Maybe I can have my say then." He turned to leave, then stopped and added over his shoulder, "Lafe says you whipped him in a rough-and-tumble. That hurt Lafe. He was never beaten before. I wouldn't push my weight around, friend. You might've been lucky. Me, I'd like to see that auction come off with a live auctioneer presiding." He turned and disappeared around the store.

The girl looked at Cassity with frank amazement in her eyes. "He said you whipped Lafe. I've seen a man killed by Lafe's fists. There's not a mark on you."

Cassity tipped his beaver hat at a careless angle. "We auctioneers are a hardshelled lot," he said with a grin. "We don't mark easy."

"Watch yourself, Mr. Cassity," the girl said worriedly. "Frank Goad is more dangerous than Lafe because he's smarter and he's faster with a gun. He's killed two men on these streets."

Roe Cassity moved out the door. "There's no cause for trouble," he said, but the note of concern in the girl's voice warmed him a little.

IT was dark when Cassity left his hotel room some time later and headed for the restaurant down the street. He'd got the handbills out, and they were being circulated, and there was nothing now to do until time for the sale. He wondered why it was that the Goads were so set on driving the girl out of business. He wondered also why the girl had given the nesters credit when it was obvious they could not pay and why even now she was more concerned over the farmers' difficulties than her own.

Roe Cassity shrugged. His interest in the situation was, putting it briefly, a ten percent commission payable when he handed the Murphy Wholesalers their money from the sale. Still and all, he felt sorry for Ella Jean Brock.

He finished his meal and strolled across the street to the saloon. He sipped a whisky slowly, watching the men come and go through the batwing doors. The bartender eased up to him across the bar.

"You the gent handling that auction sale tomorrow?" He asked.

Cassity nodded. "Yes," he said, "I reckon I am. Hate to do it sort of. Too bad them nesters won't kick through with what they owe the girl. She could square off and start clean if they'd pay."

A blond, sunburned man near Cassity's age set down his glass hard. He whirled

about facing Cassity, and there was an angry, pained expression on his face.

"Fella," he said hoarsely, "do you think we nesters don't know what's happening? If there was a dollar among us, the girl would get it. It's mighty bad to be broke and on the country. We oughta pulled out long ago." He laid a single dime on the bar for his beer and stalked off toward the swinging doors.

"Touchy, ain't he?" Cassity said.

The bartender shrugged. "That's Jim Ellison. He and the Brock girl were going steady 'til he and the other nesters got in debt to her. I hear he don't go near her any more. Ashamed to face her, I reckon. Feel kinda sorry for them kids."

The swinging doors burst open just as the young nester was about to step through them, and Lafe Goad's barrel-like body blocked the doorway. Lafe shoved Ellison aside with a shoulder.

"Don't crowd me outta' the room, nester," he grunted angrily.

Lafe headed for Cassity, but Jim Ellison reached out suddenly and grabbed his arm, spinning him around. The nester said tightly, "Blast you, Lafe. Yuh're the cause of this," and drove a hard fist into the storekeeper's beefy face.

Lafe blinked and grunted again. A cruel grin stretched his coarse lips. "Still sweet on the Brock gal, eh, Ellison? You boys been a big help to me breakin' that gal. I oughta thank yuh. Instead I'm gonna break yore stubborn neck." He moved in on the young farmer with a hard blow that snapped Ellison's head back.

The nester tried to make a fight of it. Twice he half pushed, half knocked, Lafe Goad into the wall, but he was taking a beating from Lafe's huge fists. The big storekeeper bored in, arms beating a vicious tattoo on the nester's face and stomach.

Ellison tried to move toward the center of the room, but Lafe rocked him with a right to the mouth and sent him spinning into the wall with another savage blow. Lafe held him there against the wall, raining blows on his face. It wasn't a fight now; it was slaughter.

Cassity moved across the room. He laid a hand on Lafe's shoulder and jerked him away so the nester could sink to the floor. Lafe pulled back a foot to stomp the man, but Cassity spun him across the room.

Lafe whirled on Cassity. "You want some of the same, mebbe? I figure you was just lucky today, stranger. What do you think?"

"I used to make my living at this sort of thing, Lafe," Cassity said coldly. "It isn't much different with four-ounce gloves. I can whip you any time I take the notion."

Lafe scowled, but Cassity saw uncertainty creep into the man's eyes. "I ain't got time to fool with yuh, stranger. Frank is down at his office. He wants to see yuh. If I was you I'd see him."

Cassity poured a drink and downed it. He looked across the room at the nester, Jim Ellison, who was getting shakily to his feet. Cassity felt something akin to sympathy for the man. It was as Ellison had said. It wasn't easy to be broke and on the country. Especially when that meant charity from the girl he cared for.

"I'll go see him, Lafe," Cassity said quietly, "If it's about the sale, he can do his talkin' tomorrow, but I'll go see him." He set down his glass and went outside.

FRANK Goad's law office was across the street next to the Goad's Grocery and Mercantile Store. Cassity angled toward it, and the thought kept running through his mind that there was something more behind the lawyer's scheme than merely eliminating competition by freezing out Ella Brock.

The girl had said the lawyer was after the nester trade. Cassity grinned coldly. It was easy to see why he didn't get it after watching his ill-tempered brother, Lafe, work over the nester, Jim Ellison. Farmers were clannish and they stuck together. What hurt one hurt all.

Cassity stepped up on the porch of the small adobe building that housed Frank Goad's office. He knocked on the door, then pushed it open without waiting for an answer.

Frank Goad looked up from the papers on his desk. He nodded to Cassity. "I've looked over your handbill." He said. "You havn't got much to sell. I told Lafe to bid five hundred."

Cassity scowled. "I figure on getting better than four times that amount, Goad. Lafe will be wasting his breath. Ought to be a lot of folks in this town willing to pay two thousand to twenty-five hundred for a good store."

Frank Goad shrugged. "They aren't many folks wanting to buy into a price war, Cassity. Look at it that way. I'll

make you a deal, though. I'll buy those nester accounts off of you now. They're worthless since the nesters can't pay, but, being a lawyer, I can collect them if anybody can."

Cassity shook his head. "I got no authority to sell anything at private sale, Goad. You're so sure you'll bid in that store for five hundred, why don't you wait? The accounts go with the store."

Frank Goad smiled. "I'd have to split with Lafe. I figured I might buy the accounts myself without Lafe knowing it. That way if I ever collect them, it'll be mine and he won't need to know about it."

Cassity didn't answer. He was looking at a map on the wall behind Frank Goad. It was a map of three states — Kansas, Texas and New Mexico. A red line ran from Kansas City to Amarillo, Texas. A crude pencilled line was blacked in heavily from Amarillo to Hartshorn.

"You aren't playin' for no measly fifteen hundred dollars worth of nester accounts, Goad," Cassity said slowly. "You're playin' for a fortune, and you're hopin' to cut Lafe out after him doin' all the dirty work." He grinned at the lawyer. "When is the railroad coming into Hartshorn, Goad?"

Frank Goad jumped as if he'd been stung. His face paled and his thin lips drew together tightly. "What are you talkin' about, Cassity?"

Cassity's grin broadened. "You wrote it there on that map, Goad. That red line is the railroad from Kansas City to Amarillo. That pencilled line you drew yourself. Come to think of it I heard up in Sante Fe that some of the politicians were considering a concession to the railroad company to get them to put a spur track through from Amarillo to Roswell.

"That cuts right through Hartshorn and that means the nesters are going to get a market for their crops. Their land will be worth ten times what it is now. You'd like to get hold of that land wouldn't you, Goad?"

Frank Goad smiled coolly. "All right, Cassity. You're a smart auctioneer, but don't crowd your luck. I'll pay you full value for those accounts and I'll pay it any way you want it. Suppose I make a check out to your company for five hundred and pay you a thousand cash? They wouldn't need to know about it. They'd figure five hundred a good price for a bunch of worthless accounts."

Cassity looked at the lawyer. "You're a smooth one, Goad. Lafe has been taking a loss on his groceries trying to freeze out Ella Jean, thinking that when she's out of business he could jack up his prices and make his loss back and more, too. But you know better than that. The town wouldn't stand for too high prices, and with the railroad coming in there'll be such a boom that there's apt to be a half dozen stores like yours spring up. You can't freeze them all out.

"All you've been tryin' to do is cut prices down so much the nesters can't afford not to trade with you. Soon as they were in debt to you enough you'd sue them and take over their property. You'd get around the fact that homesteads are exempt from payment of debts by getting them to give you a mortgage to secure their accounts. You could foreclose all right."

Frank Goad shrugged. "What's it to you, Cassity? How about those accounts? You stand to clear a thousand dollars."

Cassity's face hardened. He slapped on his beaver hat and stood up. "No dice, Goad. And I think I'll have a little talk with Lafe. He might like to know about the doublecross his brother is slipping him. You never did intend to let Lafe in on the real reason you wanted him to start that price war.

"You figured if the nesters got in debt to Lafe you could buy the accounts off of him without him knowing why you wanted them. You probably tried to buy Ella Jean's accounts from her, but she was sore at you and wouldn't even talk to you. Yeah, Goad, I think Lafe will like to know about this. He's a big man and strong. He might break your back if he got mad enough."

'You're a fool, Cassity," Goad said tightly, and his hand went to the shoulder holster inside his coat.

Cassity saw the glint of light on steel as the gun came out and dove across the desk straight at the lawyer. Cassity's head hit Frank Goad square in the chest, and there was a dull crash as the lawyer's swivel chair went over, pining him beneath it.

Cassity rolled off the desk and fell on the lawyer hard. His knees hit Goad square in the stomach, jarring the breath from him. They lawyer moaned and lay still . . .

IT was noon the next day when Cassity pushed through the crowd gathered around the store. Ella Jean was there and she smiled at him, though her face was strained and white. It was hard for her, being sold out before the whole town.

"Men," Cassity announced, "we've got a store here that'll tally out over twenty-five hundred, lock, stock and barrel, not counting the accounts receivable. Any of you gentlemen who might be tired of working can step up and let this store make a living for you. Let's have a bid."

There was a murmur through the crowd. A harsh voice said loudly, "I'll bid five hundred."

Cassity's eyes sought out the bidder and he found himself staring at Lafe Goad's heavy-jowled face. Lafe grinned at him crookedly.

"We've got a clown among us, gents," Cassity said. "Let's have a serious bid now."

A short-square-faced man in the front shook his head. "You ain't sellin' a store mister. You're sellin' a big chunk of perdition with the lid prized off. I wouldn't take it as a gift."

Cassity's face flushed. He looked over the crowd, waiting. Lafe Goad said again, "I bid five hundred. Yore handbill says the store goes to the highest bidder for cash." He waved a roll of bills. "Let's close up the deal."

Roe Cassity felt a tug at his sleeve. He looked around to see Ella Jean beside him. There was despair etched on her features.

"I've been talking to some of the men," she said. "Lafe passed out the word that the man who bought this store would be buying bad trouble. They've chilled the bidding so they can buy it at their own price. The Goads stop at nothing to get what they want. It's like giving the store away."

Cassity's face set in bleak lines. "I'll raise that Lafe," he said. I bid a thousand. The handbill says cash to the high bidder, and it doesn't say the auctioneer can't make a bid himself."

Uncertainty settled on Lafe's face. Cassity knew that Frank Goad had told Lafe to put in a bid for five hundred dollars. Now with competition, Lafe wanted further instructions. But Frank Goad was not around. It was the laughter that decided him. Lafe was a man who took his importance seriously, and the laughter of the crowd goaded him on.

"All right, Cassity," he said thickly, "I make it twelve hundred."

Cassity smiled with cool insolence. "Why now, Lafe, I'm disappointed in you. I've been hearing over town what a big man you are in these parts. You want these people to think you'd beat a poor, defenseless girl out of her last dime? I can't stand by and see that happen, Lafe. I've got fifteen hundred that says this store is worth more than your bid."

A roar of approval rose from the crowd. "That's tellin' him, Cassity!" a leathery-faced farmer yelled. "He's been doin' his worst to break Ella Jean. Make him pay through the nose."

Lafe's neck swelled out with anger. "Yuh can't play horse with me, Cassity. I ain't biddin' another dime 'til I see Frank." He elbowed his way through the men behind him.

A chill swept through Cassity. "It'll be too late when you get back, Lafe. I'm knocking it down to myself. I'd hate to be in your shoes, Lafe, when Frank hears you crawfished. He won't like it, Lafe."

The big man stopped cold. Sweat popped out on his fleshy face and his eyes roved uneasily. "Curse you, Cassity. All right, I make it seventeen-fifty. Frank will kill yuh for this."

"You're still biddin' cheap, Lafe. I make it two thousand."

Lafe's mouth sagged open. He looked around wildly. "Where's Frank?" he yelled. "Why ain't he here?"

Ella Jean gripped Cassity's arm. "You don't have to do this for me. Suppose he lets you have it? You'll be stuck without enough stock to start up business. And if you do start up, he or Frank will force you out. They'll kill you.

"I got to do it," Cassity said grimly. "I got to squeeze a decent price out of him or have it talked around that Roe Cassity was cold-decked at his own game by a shyster lawyer and a big bully of a storekeeper. An auctioneer lives on his rep. I'd starve on mine if that happened."

Cassity said again, loudly, "Two thousand, Lafe. Let me hear twenty-five hundred and its yours."

"Cassity," Lafe said hoarsely, "I'm comin' up there and I'm gonna break yore back Yuh can't rib me into a bid like that." He started toward Cassity slowly, his big arms bulging with tensed muscles.

"Lafe," Cassity said quietly, "I'll make you a deal. I'll let it go for twenty-two hundred and you let the girl keep the accounts receivable. They're nester accounts and worthless but Ella Jean will keep them and knock three hundred off the price."

LAFE stopped short. His lips moved in low, profane mutterings. "I wouldn't give no twenty-two hundred for that store, Cassity. The store's gutted, and I figure you can't restock it. You take it for two thousand. We'll break you just like we did Ella Jean."

Cassity laughed. "I've got wholesale connections, Lafe. I'll put on a price war that even you can't meet and stay in business. You don't make money cuttin' prices, Lafe, and you been doin' it a year now. You want another dose of the same? You already bid seventeen-fifty. What's another four hundred? What'll Frank say, Lafe?"

Rage shook the big storekeeper's body, but he said, "All right, Cassity. I bid twenty-two hundred, and the girl keeps the accounts." His big hands trembled as he counted out the money. "If Frank doesn't like this, I'll kill you, Cassity."

Roe Cassity took the money, counted it carefully, and tucked it into his pocket. "Lafe," he said quietly, "Frank's over at his office. If I were you I'd go over and tell him that you paid twenty-two hundred for the store without the accounts. He'll be interested to know that."

Lafe Goad blinked stupidly, vague suspicion in his small eyes. He turned and walked toward his brother's office with the slow shuffling step of a man uncertain of himself.

Ella Jean looked at Cassity. "I thought sure that Frank Goad would be at the sale. I don't think he would have let Lafe bid as high as he did if he'd been here."

Cassity stuck a thin cheroot between his lips, lighted it and exhaled expansively. "I knew he wouldn't," he said. "That's why I have him tied, gagged and locked in his own office. He'd have asked me to show my money when I made my first bid."

The girl looked at him wide-eyed. "You were bluffing?"

Cassity sighed. "If I had that kind of money, I'd be a banker."

"Cassity," the girl said worriedly, "You better get out of town. When Lafe and Frank Goad get together there's going to be bad trouble."

"Yeah," Cassity said, "there is, but I don't think I'll be in it. You see, Lafe figured he and Frank had to have this store before they could call off the price war and start raising prices. But that price war and breaking you was just incidental. What Frank Goad really wanted was those nester accounts, and that's what he hasn't got. When he jumps on Lafe about buying this store he's going to give himself away, and Lafe will wake up to the fact that Frank was just using him and the store so he could get a club over the nesters' heads. Those boys might be the death of each other yet."

Cassity took the roll of bills out of his pocket and counted off two hundred. "That's what's left after the Murphy Wholesalers are paid." He said, "You said you were leaving town. Which way are you going?"

"I don't know," the girl said bitterly. "It doesn't matter."

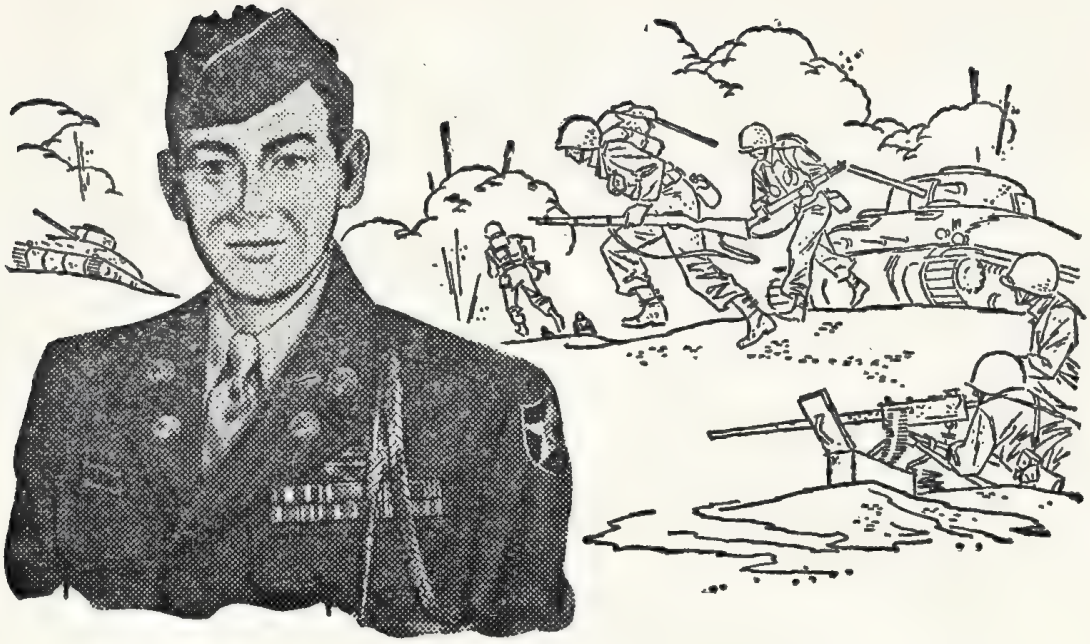
Cassity flicked the ash from his cigar. "Seen a good fight last night. Young fellow name of Jim Ellison tried his dangedest to whip Lafe Goad on account of what Lafe had done to you. Good lookin' kid, that Ellison, and he'll be worth some money one of these days. Railroad coming through here will make all those farmers well heeled. I got a hunch this Ellison kid will take your leavin' pretty hard. He figures he's partly the cause of you being put out of business and he feels awful bad about it. If I was you I'd——"

Cassity grinned as he watched the girl running across the street to where a group of farmers were talking. He saw the look on Jim Ellison's face and turned his back. Some things were not for a stranger's eyes.

As he walked toward the stage station Cassity glanced at Frank Goad's law office. A terrible noise was coming from the adobe building, a noise like two fierce and savage animals engaged in deadly combat.

Roe Cassity smiled.

Next Issue: COURAGE IN THE CRAGLANDS, a Pioneer Folk Story by Harold F. Cruickshank, and many other exciting yarns!



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THE TEXAN

By MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

Serving under peacock-proud Captain Willard, Cy Hawkins was hired by the Army as wagon boss and pack mule expert—but when Apaches came raiding, he showed he had other talents!

CHAPTER I

"You Can Tell a Texan"

THEY were riding blindly into an Apache trap. Cy Hawkins, the civilian employe in charge of the wagon and pack train, was worried, not for himself, but for the fate of the two companies of blue-clad cavalry, riding all unsuspecting, in front of him, toward that narrow canyon.

Captain Willard, at the head of the cavalry column, was out to gain quick glory and promotion. The trouble was, as Cy Hawkins well knew, that Captain Willard didn't know beans about fighting Apaches, even if he had been a general in the Civil War, recently ended.

Cy Hawkins himself had been a colonel, only he had worn the letters CSA on the collar of his gray uniform instead of USA. He was lucky, he figured, to get this job as civilian packmaster, ex-generals and ex-colonels being a dime a dozen, these days.

Only, and here was the difference, he did know something about fighting Apaches. He'd been born and raised

in Texas. Therefore, he was worried at the prospect ahead.

"What are you looking so worried about, Cy?" Lieutenant Forsythe rode up from his command of the rear guard and eased his horse down to a walk.

"I'm plumb scared to death, Loot'nent!"

Hawkins glanced at the hills flanking their route, "Scared of ridin' into this Black Canyon up ahead. Especially with an Injun poppin' up like a jack-in-the-box every yard or two along the ridge-tops."

Young Forsythe, not long out of West Point, stared along the grim rampart of hills and shook his head.

"I don't see anything!"

"No? Look at that theah jack rabbit hightailin' down the slope like the devil hisself was after him! Ole Br'er Jack Rabbit don't like Apaches anymore'n what we do, and he's leavin' that theah neighborhood in a hurry, not stoppin' to pack up his things!

"And see that little flurry o' pebbles farther along 'bout ten yards? That theah's a Gila monster or a rattlesnake, wishful to get hisself from hithah to whence, as quick as the good Lohd will let him. And look at that theah mesquite bush jes' behind. They wa'nt no mesquite bush theah five minutes ago; and mesquite don't grow quite that fast, not even in Texas, it don't!"

"But what—" Forsythe was puzzled.

"That theah's a lady's veil for an Apache that ain't no lady. That black-hearted Injun don't aim to show his head on the skyline so he hoists up a bush slowlike, and peers through it, figgerin' ain't noboddy goin' to take note of a spare bush or two—which they ain't. In this outfit, every tarnation Yank is ridin' along starin' between his hosses ears, includin' Captain Willard, instead of lettin' his eyes rove around and see what's goin' on!"

Forsythe looked grave.

"You think the Apaches are going to jump us, Cy?"

"What would you be doin' if you were an Apache? Especially if you were wily ole Christophe, knowin' you'd be shot or hanged for torturin' and killin' forty or fifty white men and women and children. And suppose you had some hundred 'nd fifty or two hundred tough warriors ag'in about eighty sodgers, ridin' along starin' between their horses ears, under a captain who ain't never fought against them human tigers called Apaches, and won't listen to nobuddy who has! You'd find yourself a nice place like this Black Canyon ahead of us and you'd lay up among the rocks and raise merry Cain with them when they walked into your trap!

"That's exactly what old Christophe is aimin' to do! If I was you, Loot'nent, Ah'd ride up ahead and try to argufy Captain Willard into stayin' outa that canyon and be sure to call him 'General'!"

Forsythe picked up his reins, none to cheerfully, and rode forward.

"Trouble is, Cy, Captain Willard is too much like a Texan. You can tell a Texan—"

"But you cain't tell him much! Ah've heard that one before. You run along now and use your silvery tongued oratory."

HAWKINS studied the hills above him, and the stream which wound its way through the valley at his right, as well as the narrowing of the valley into the canyon not ten minutes ride ahead. He stared back at the six wagons and thirty odd pack mules behind him —too big a train for that small force in this terrain, and took stock of his six packers; tough, hardy men, well armed.

Hawkins was proud of his pack mules and the neatly thrown Diamond hitch firmly binding each load to its big *aparejo*. His men had loaded three hundred and twenty pounds on each mule instead of the one hundred and seventy five mentioned by the Quartermaster Manual. An expert could do this by careful fitting of *aparejos* and skillful balancing of loads. Cy Hawkins was a man after the heart of General Crook, just come into the command of the troops in the Southwest. It was he who came to be known by the Apaches as the "Gray Fox" and by the soldiers as the "Grand Daddy of the Pack Mules" because of his fondness for the long-eared "jar heads" and the packers who were to make his rapid marches possible.

"Ah ain't aimin' to lose all these good packers and teamsters and jar heads on account o' that nitwit Willard if I can help it!" Hawkins said to himself and looked up as Forsythe came riding back,

looking even more depressed than when he had set forth.

"He's aimin' to go on through?"

Forsythe nodded.

"Did he give you a tongue lashin'?"

"Told me to stick to my job, and he'd stick to his! I told him you saw plenty of Indian signs. He said you were just a blankety blank Texan who thought he knew more than he did, that he'd had a run in with you before. He wants you to report to him immediately. I didn't know you knew the Old Man before!"

"Yeah! We kinda had a run in durin' the late war!" admitted Cy, cryptically, and picking up his reins, set his horse into a trot, aiming to get the coming interview over with before they entered that grim canyon.

Nor did Cy Hawkins trouble to explain that, while raiding through Tennessee, commanding a regiment of "Rebel" cavalry, he had outfoxed and captured the then General Willard by setting a trap for him much as Christophe, the Apache chief, had set a trap for him today. It had been much the same sort of setup with a wooded defile instead of a canyon. Hawkins had dismounted his gray clad troopers, worn down to a mere hundred and fifty men, and set them in ambush against the five or six hundred blue-clad infantrymen under General Willard.

Willard had made the same mistake he was making today. Instead of sending a small force through to explore the defile and seize the farther end, he had marched in close order right into the trap.

Had he, at least, provided some sort of base upon which to fall back in case he ran into trouble he still might have extricated most of his command and himself. But lacking this, at the first burst of fire, his men had fallen back pell mell, retreat had turned into rout and rout into panic. General Willard himself had been scooped up by Hawkin's lean troopers.

"You hadn't ought to have marched smack into this heah trap, thataway, General," Hawkins had told him mildly. "I couldn't have captured you nohow with my few men if you had used your head!"

I was all meant in the spirit of helpfulness but Willard had flushed as red as a turkey cock, staring with supercilious eye at this lanky individual in ragged gray homespun who dared to tell him about military science.

"I'm your prisoner, sir!" Willard had said haughtily, "and the laws of war forbid the torture of prisoners, a torture to which I feel I'm being subjected by having to listen to your—ah—learned effusions on the art of war!"

Hawkins had gazed at him thoughtfully.

"Have it your own way, General," he said mildly enough, "I ain't aimin' to torture you none—not even to keep you as prisoner. I'm travelin' kinda light and fast and ain't got no comforts for Yankee generals."

Willard's haughtiness diminished slightly, and he unbent.

"That is very good of you," he approved.

"Not at all, not at all, General. Down in Texas where my daddy fought against Santa Ana, he once captured a Mexican colonel, and let him go free for just about the same reason I'm lettin' you go, suh!"

"And what was that reason?" Willard had asked, inclined to benevolent humoring of this strange character who was going to release him to return to his own lines.

"Oh, my daddy figgered that the Mexican colonel was more valuable fightin' ag'in him, than languishin' in jail unable to lead more sheep to the slaughter!" said Hawkins, mildly.

HE CHUCKLED now at memory of Willard's spluttering wrath, but grew grave again recalling that he had to face that same Willard now, under somewhat different conditions.

The command had been halted, and men were dismounted adjusting saddles and saddle blankets, but Willard still sat his horse instead of getting down to rest it like a good cavalryman.

"You wanted to see me, General?" Hawkins inquired, noting the storm signals set in Willard's taut pose and tense frown.

"I should say I do! I want you to understand, Hawkins, once and for all, that you are a civilian quartermaster hired to tend to mules and not to promulgate your ideas of military strategy.

"You tend to your job and I'll tend to mine, or I'll use the regulations governing the conduct of civilian employes in the field to see that you do!

That's all! You'll keep your train closed up and your mouth closed up or you'll be in trouble!"

"Part of my job, General, is to see that my men and mules and hosses comes in safe and sound!" Hawkin's voice was gentle but there was no missing the tinkle of steel. "If I feel you are riskin' my life and the lives of my men and animals by walkin' into the trap set for you in that canyon, there ain't no court martial in the world goin' to punish me for sayin' so."

Before Captain Willard's wrath could break upon him Hawkins asked a swift question.

"Have you sent scouts in to see whether that canyon is occupied in force by the enemy, Suh?"

"You talk too much!" Willard's face was white with anger. "I'll make it my business to see that you have your court martial when we get back to the post! Now get out of here and back to your mules before I have you shot for mutiny in face of the enemy!"

Tight lipped, Hawkins had backed his horse away from the irate captain and started to turn him back to the rear, when he paused.

A lone scout, not one of the two Indian scouts who were squatted on the ground nearby doing nothing, but a young soldier, came galloping out of the canyon mouth and drew up at last before Willard, saluting in picture book style.

"Sir, I have ridden through the canyon and ain't seen hide nor hair of an Injun!" he reported.

"No," said Hawkins, "the Injuns don't aim to let you see hide nor hair of 'em before they're ready to start shootin'!" With this parting word, he went back to his train. The captain's voice rang out in the commands "Prepare to Mount! Mount! Forward! Ha-o-ow!"

At the command, the teamsters climbed back into the wagon seats, each accompanied by the soldier guard, brakes were loosened, reins picked up and tightened, and that skilled combination of tautened reins, cracking whip and crackling language that sends six mules heaving simultaneously into their collars, with smooth concerted pull on the singletrees, started each canvas-covered wagon rolling into motion.

The pack mules were a simpler problem, each of them starting under his own power, impelled thereto by the abjurations of the packers beside them and the moving out of the bell mare in front of them. Behind them, the dozen troopers of the rear guard under Forsythe, swung into their saddles, adjusted carbine boots and reins and started sedately to follow.

But this smooth flow of motion came to a sudden stop. Cy Hawkins reined in by the leading wagon and pointed at the near rear wheel.

"Hold it!" he called, "that wheel needs lookin' after."

THE abrupt halting of the entire column of wagons and pack mules and horses brought Lieutenant Forsythe up to inquire the cause.

Cy Hawkins enlightened him, low voiced. "In about five minutes, mebbe six, all blazes is goin' to bust loose in that canyon, Loot'nent! When the shootin' starts the sodgers has got to get outta there quick—and they'll be streamin' outa there lookin' for a place to hole in, the Injuns hot on their tails.

"You can do as you please, Loot'nent, but I'm aimin' to fix 'em up a place foh them to hole in and hold off the Apache. Them men o' your'n could be a powerful help but I'm aimin' to hold off the Injuns with my packers and teamsters."

Without further word to Forsythe, Cy Hawkins, scarcely raising his voice above a conversational tone, spaced the wagons in three sides of a square, with the fourth side open on the small river whose other bank was an insurmountable cliff. The wagons in place, the teams were unhitched and picketed. The pack mules were led up to the spaces between the wagons, ammunition unpacked and the big *aparejos* of stout canvas and leather, on wooden frames, were strung along, to form breastworks. Before the task was half finished, Forsythe made up his mind. He trotted his rear guard into the enclosure, and quickly had them dismounted and helping.

His men had scarcely started upon their task when everyone stopped. They stared at each other and listened. For, clearborne on the still noon air, there came the sharp crack of rifles, the savage high-pitched yells of the Apaches, and the deeper-toned shouts of the white men reverberating within the canyon walls into a rising roar of sound.

CHAPTER II

Whistling Death

CUNNINGLY, the Apaches had kept themselves concealed until the entire column of cavalry troopers had advanced halfway through the canyon. The small advance guard had been nearly at the far end.

The first warning of what was to come was a single rifle shot, the sharp crack of a Winchester, evidently a signal. For the high ridges above suddenly came alive with Apaches. Their rifles started with a ragged but swiftly accelerating, vicious cracking.

The little clump of blue-clad cavalrymen in the advance guard came galloping back, three horses with empty saddles following them. Before they reached the head of the column two more saddles were emptied, and one of the horses reared and went over backward.

Captain Willard's voice rose above the tumult. "Form fours! Trot! E-e-ow-oh!" The column closed up.

"Fight on foot! Action right!" Men swarmed to the ground, carbines in hand. They linked their horses, while one man in each set of fours swung them about and let them at a gallop toward the rear.

On foot, their carbines barking steadily, the blue-clad line of some sixty men sought such cover as they could find and tried to return the hail of thudding bullets and zipping arrows.

All along the line troopers were keeling over, dead or wounded. Lieutenant Norcross dropped dead with a bullet through his head, his blood and brains splashing into the face of the man next him, who died an instant later.

At this point a shout had gone up from the flank nearest the canyon entrance. Captain Willard, face pale but doggedly directing fire, looked up to see a band of Apaches swarming down from the hillside, racing to cut off the retreat of the dismounted cavalrymen.

The men saw it as quickly. There was no need for orders.

Impelled with the same idea, the troopers began to move toward that threat, pausing to fire every few steps, some of them aiding wounded comrades forward between shots.

A good half of the men went down before they reached the end of the canyon, and most of the unhit men were carrying wounded, when suddenly from the canyon mouth, behind them, came a slight reprieve. The troopers of the rear guard along with a group of packers and teamsters all led by Cy Hawkins, were threading their way through the retreating men. At the right moment, they hit the ground and poured a steady hail of bullets into the close-packed Apaches who had swarmed in for the kill.

The remorseless rattle and crash of the rifles and carbines of the small rear guard group, checked the Indians long enough to permit the survivors of the two companies to move into the shelter of the hastily formed wagon corral. The Apaches helped by pausing to scalp the dead soldiers in the valley, and to pick up the carbines and ammunition of the fallen.

Cy Hawkins, seeing that the last of the wounded were safely within the corral, some two hundred yards away, gave the order to return. There came an increased burst of fire from his handful of men and then they rose, one by one, and moved, crouching, to the rear. They turned and fired, and moved backward again, keeping such a sting in the tail of their retreat that the Apaches paused.

By the time the Indians resumed their advance, Lieutenant Forsythe had men lined along the breastworks, and covered the final rush of Cy's group by a hail of fire. Under its flailing destruction the Apaches sought cover and began taking pot shots at the corral.

CY HAWKINS was the last man into the shelter. The opening through which he had entered was immediately closed by the body of a horse just killed by an Apache shot.

He saw Captain Willard seated leaning against a wagon wheel, a bandage about his head and a dazed look in his eyes, and learned that a lead slug from an Apache gun, had creased the captain's head just before he had arrived at the corral, and knocked him into an unconsciousness from which he was just recovering.

But the place was boiling with activity despite the incapacity of the com-

manding officer. The troopers, pouring into the corral had immediately gathered up the loose horses and picketed them, and were working feverishly at stopping up openings in the barricade of wagons and *aparejos,* dragging out sacks of grain, boxes of hardtack, sides of bacon, folded tentage and anything else that would slow or stop a bullet.

The Apache fire increased in volume. Horses and mules in the open space inside the corral began to drop. As quickly as one went down, its body was dragged over to aid in strengthening the barricade. Cy Hawkins passed the word around, suggesting that details hurry down to the river's edge to fill canteens before the Apache fire should make it too dangerous.

And that fire was rapidly becoming more dangerous. Mulcahey, one of the packers, put his hat upon a stick and raised it above the barricade, holding it aloft for a few seconds. He brought it down, gazing at it in astonishment.

"Fur the love of gosh!" he breathed. "Three bullet holes in it before Oi had toime to say scat."

From the higher ground on three sides Apache sharpshooters blazed away with Sharps and Remingtons and Winchesters, so that the air was filled with the hornet whiz of bullets, the occasional angry whine of ricochets and the constant rustling sound of death speeding overhead.

The horses and mules suffered the worst. Every minute saw its toll of dead and wounded animals.

Men needed no bidding to deepen their rifle pits against the death that whispered and crackled and whined above them. Captain Willard, still braced against the wagon wheel, was slowly coming out of his mental fog, but he had not recovered enough to take command.

Lieutenant Cornwall, weak from loss of blood through the bullet wound in his thigh, was nearly helpless. Young Lieutenant Forsythe was the only officer on his feet—and this was his first action. Cy Hawkins stuck closely to him, giving an occasional quiet suggestion.

"Ah'd see that plenty of ammunition was placed by each man, Loot'nent, if Ah was you. Them Injuns will be figgerin' on rushin' us pretty pronto!" Forsythe gave orders instantly, blanching as a ricochet bullet brought a scream of pain from among the line of wounded laid out in a row under hastily stretched tarpaulins.

Captain Willard looked up, dull eyed, as Cy Hawkins passed near him.

"I understand that this was your idea, Hawkins, setting up this corral!"

His voice was irritable and peevish sounding, "All I would say is that it is one heck of a hole you picked!"

Hawkins gazed at him tolerantly. "That shore is the truth, Suh, but Ah reckoned it would be better than no hole a-tall!" he returned gently. Captain Willard grunted but said nothing.

A THUDDING bullet struck nearby followed by a groan, and the immediate call for "Hospital Orderly!"

Captain Willard and Lieutenant Cornwall shook their heads despondently. Young Forsythe was watching Cy Hawkins.

"What are you figuring out, Cy?" he asked.

"I was figgerin' that it ain't no time to git discouraged. Heah we are, plenty o' ammunition, plenty o' food, and even more food if we figger on eatin a little hoss flesh—and plenty o' water. If the men keep their heads down and don't act foolish, the Apaches can't kill 'em off to the point where they could rush us without gettin' the blazes shot out of 'em. No, suh, we could be lots worse off."

"I don't see how!" Captain Willard snorted, "and what's the end of it all? Just waiting a few more days won't make any difference. Whether our scalps decorate an Apache's belt this Tuesday or next Sunday won't make much difference in the long run! We're a hundred and fifty miles from the nearest reinforcement, with no way of getting word through."

"That's just what I was comin' to," Hawkins explained, gently, "I figger, come nightfall, I could mosey on outa here, leadin' a hoss, if they's any hoss left by then, or if not, rustlin one from the Injuns, and git through to Fort Hancock say in three-foah days."

The three officers stared at him in silence. Willard and Cornwall shook their heads at last.

"Not one chance in a thousand!" said Willard emphatically.

"Not for one man. Maybe if we sent three, one might possibly get through,"

admitted Cornwall.

"Don't make no difference to me, a-tall, whether it's one or three, so long as I'm one o' the three," agreed Hawkins, and before any objections could be raised again, he added, "I got one man, a packer, he's a Tonto Apache, brother of Mario, who is chief of the Tontos—José is meaner 'n catgut but he'd kill his own brother for me if I asked him. He's a shore mean hombre but dependable!"

And so it was agreed. A third man, a trooper who had been raised in the Southwest, volunteered. Preparations were made to send them forth, José first, followed after an hour by Terry Blake the young trooper, followed in turn after another hour by Hawkins. The three were to leave after dark.

It was late afternoon when a sudden rush of about 25 of the Indians made a sudden attack—no doubt planning to catch the troopers off guard. But it failed when a withering blast cut them down before they could reach the barricade. A few escaped and the whole band drew back out of range. Then there came a strange lull in the Apache firing. Hawkins was immediately alert.

"Them Injuns is cookin' up some kind of devilment!" he said to Forsythe and the two, crouching low behind the barricades made their way to a point where they could see the enemy without being too much exposed.

IT WAS Hawkins who sighted the licking flames in the dry sage and grass of the valley bottom, flames that were mounting rapidly as they watched, sweeping toward the barricade.

Without a word Hawkins seized a burning branch from a small cook fire and flung himself over the wall of dirt, *aparejos* and dead horses, and was outside setting a backfire before the startled Apaches saw him.

Bullets now began to ping about him, but he calmly went about the business of lighting small fires here and there as though he were alone in the world. The troopers at the loopholes saw what he was about and began firing at every Apache head that rose, each soldier expecting to see the cool Texan drop any second.

Not until the flames he had started began to lick up and combine, did he calmly brush off his hands and stride back to leap inside the barricade again. A growl of admiration rose from the men.

The flames from his backfire crackled into activity mounting higher, with some of them racing toward the wagons, but the aroused troopers, with shovels and their entrenching tools, threw dirt upon them and beat out the flames that had caught two of the wagons.

The fire set by the Indians raced toward the backfire and the two met and died down. The Apaches, who had expected to rush the place in the excitement, showed their anger by blazing away furiously for a good ten minutes before they began to slow down to more deliberate and more deadly sniping.

"That was a highly courageous action!" Lieutenant Cornwall called across to Cy Hawkins. Cy Hawkins grinned and shook his head.

"I figgered it was hot enough in here without bein' set afire!" he explained.

"Nothing but a Texas showoff!" grunted Captain Willard. Cornwall and Forsythe looked at him in surprise but the captain added nothing to his remark.

The afternoon wore on with a steady and unceasing sniping from the Apaches. More horses and mules went down. Men cursed as their favorite mounts were killed or worse still, wounded so badly that they had to be put out of their misery.

Cy Hawkins dug a pit for his own horse and piled earth about it to keep it from harm for the hard ride ahead of him that night.

Supper was early and frugal, bacon and hardtack and coffee. As darkness descended the men put out their fires to avoid Apache bullets.

José, the ill visaged Tonto Apache packer, slid out quietly, leading his horse, and disappeared into the night. An hour later, Terry, the young trooper, followed and men strained to listen, as he merged into the gloom, but heard no sound. Cy Hawkins packed his saddle bags with grain for his horse and cold fried bacon and hardtack, cleaned his rifle and revolver and filled his belt with ammunition. He was all saddled and ready a good half hour before it was time for him to start.

The men were roughly divided into watches, with one half sleeping, while the other half strained to watch and listen for any surprise move by the

Apaches in the darkness.

Only an occasional shot was fired at the corral, the Apaches not being too fond of night attacks, but each shot was met with an instantaneous reply, the troopers firing at the gun flash. Then there came a burst of fire from the Apaches followed by a yell from one of the troopers half-way down the front of the corral.

Forsythe and Cy Hawkins moved down there quickly.

"The Injuns heaved something over the barricade and ran away, shouting some and laughin'," said the trooper, "it's there on the ground!"

Cy Hawkins touched the thing with his foot, it was a sack containing something that felt like a pair of melons. He pulled the sack into shelter behind a thick part of the barricade and struck a light, emptying the contents. Several men had crowded around, Forsythe looked over his shoulder. Horror and grim anger were on every face.

The freshly severed heads of José, the Tonto Apache packer, and Terry, the young trooper, eyes staring, lips drawn back in a queer sort of grimace, lay before them.

CHAPTER III

The Lone Trail

HAWKINS stared thoughtfully down at the gruesome sight.

"Two good lives wasted," he said quietly to Captain Willard who had come over to see what the excitement might be. "I offered to go alone and I'm goin' alone in any case, as it turns out!"

"Your head will come rolling in here too, Hawkins!" Willard said grimly.

"I aim to keep my haid on my shoulders!" insisted Cy Hawkins gently.

"You'd better go on foot then Cy, it was probably the noise made by their horses that disclosed them to the Apaches!" suggested young Forsythe.

"No, I aim to go a-horseback. I'm a-headin' out now. You boys start firin', and keep the guns goin' for about ten minutes. So long. Be seein' you!" He disappeared in the darkness across the corral where he had his horse in its pit.

The troopers began to fire, keeping up a steady chorus of sound with their carbines. The sharper crack of the packer's rifles, added to the din. Cy Hawkins led his horse down to the river, mounted it, and rode across to the darkness of the farther bank, under the cliff. The noise of the firing drowned out the splashing of the horse and its grunts and lunges as it scrambled across the shallow stream and extricated itself from a pot hole or two enroute.

Keeping a sharp watch out for quicksands, Cy Hawkins worked his mount down stream, watching the flashes of the trooper's guns and the answering flashes from the surrounding hills, locating the Apache positions by the latter. He kept along in the water until well past the last spurts of fire. Then, so that the relentless Apache trackers would not pick up his trail in the morning, he moved along in the shallows of the opposite bank for a good half mile, knowing that the noise of the stream would drown out the splashing of his horse's hoofs.

He came out into a grove of cottonwood trees. His horse, to rid itself of the water, shook and stamped, with a prodigious clatter and rattle of equipment. Cy moved quickly away from that spot, threading his way through the cottonwoods for some five minutes, then pausing to listen intently, in an effort to find out if he was discovered.

There as not a sound, except the liquid gurgle and splash of the stream nearby, as he listened for several minutes, except the occasional stamp of his horse, irritated by mosquitoes or gnats.

"A hoss is shore a poor bet for movin' silent at night!" reflected Cy. Then, as he was about certain that all was well, he heard the cry of some night bird behind him. He frowned. It might be a night bird or it might be a lurking Apache signalling to his confederates.

Cy would know in another minute or two. He listened tensly for some sixty seconds, then raised his head sharply. The cry of the night bird had sounded again, this time, nearer, and behind him. It was answered by a similar cry coming from the hillside beyond the fringe of cottonwoods. He was certain now that those were no real night birds. The cry from the hillside came again, this time nearer. They were closing in on him.

The certainty gave him new confi-

dence. He could play at that game as well as an Apache! Swiftly he removed his rifle from the boot on the saddle and as swiftly tethered his horse to a cottonwood bole, then stepped back into the thickness of growth beyond the path and froze into immobility, clubbed rifle in hand.

His horse was worried and anxious to be on his way and irritated by the stinging insects. It stamped and moved around the cottonwood bole to the limit of its halter tie rope, making considerable noise in the process.

The bird calls had now ceased. The Apaches were too near now to disclose themselves by signals. The horse quieted down for a space and Cy listened intently. His vigil was rewarded by hearing the faint sound made by leather or cloth brushing against a dry branch.

It was up trail in the direction from which he'd come. He stared down trail. In the shadows of a large cottonwood trunk, he saw a darker shadow detach itself. Then he lost it to view. All grew silent and still for a space. Cy knew what was happening now. The two Apaches had located each other, and, suspicious of the riderless horse, were circling around him in the darkness somewhere.

Standing silent, while being hunted, keeping rigid, without the quiver of a muscle, for a long time, is the hardest test of a good scout. But Cy had been trained in a hard school. No Chiricahua could have been more still and lifeless seeming than he was for minute after minute, until the time must have sped well into half an hour.

He was tempted to move out, but instinct and training told him that this was a test of nerves, with a victory to the one with the most patience. Another five minutes passed.

Then he had his reward. Two dark shadows intervened suddenly between him and his horse. The horse snorted in fright and swung around the cottonwood bole with a clatter of equipment, trampling of hoofs, and creaking of leather.

In two swift strides Cy had crossed the trail. Some instinct must have warned the nearest shadow for he emitted a warning call in guttural Apache just a second before Hawkin's clubbed rifle smashed into his skull.

The other shadowy figure leaped at Cy, hand upraised as with a knife, but again the rifle butt crashed down, smashing hand and arm and thudding heavily into shoulder. The Apache grunted in pain but was still full of fight, grasping and holding the rifle butt and striving to dodge under it to close with Cy.

The counter to that was simple. Cy jerked the rifle toward him, pulling his antagonist off balance and as the Apache started to recover, Cy let go of the rifle and smashed his fist full into the chin of the half-naked Indian, putting everything he had of bone and muscle into the terrific blow.

NOW THE second Apache dropped and was still. To make assurance doubly sure, Cy slipped out his sheath knife and plunged it to the hilt in each of the two still figures.

The smell of blood and the struggle excited the horse. It snorted and tugged at the halter shank and reared. Cy soothed the animal gentle voiced, and placed a quiet hand on is trembling shoulder. The horse nudged him nervously but quieted down. In the comparative silence Cy listened intently, in an effort to discover if other foes lurked nearby. There was no sound.

He untied his horse, picked up his rifle and led the animal on down the trail, moving soft footed and tense, studying every shadow, and anxious now, to be out on the open mesa, where he could cover ground more rapidly.

His horse was picking its way across a rock-strewn draw, leading up to the high mesa. He hoped that his own danger from the band of Apaches gathered around he corral was past. The new danger, now, was that of running into war parties of Indians hurrying to be in at the death of the force of white men at bay.

Arriving near the top of the draw, Cy dismounted, both to ease his horse up the steepest part of the ascent and to lessen the rise of the silhouette of horse and man against the stars. To avoid this latter, he moved along beneath the crest until he found chaparral growth to screen his emergence on to the upper level. He arrived there just as the first rays of the new moon cast a ghostly radiance over the mesa before him, and the valley he had just left.

Now a less skilled man would have

pressed on, without ever a backward look, but, to a man trained for survival against those human tigers, the Apaches, the back trail as as important as the trail ahead. Cy Hawkins spent precious minutes peering through the chaparral brush down at the cottonwood thicket he had left below.

It was time well spent. His eyes registered a movement of shadow emerging from the thicket, following along the trail he had taken. He watched the shadows emerge into the faint moonlight. He counted them—four, five—three more, eight horsemen—two in advance dismounted, bending low from time to time. The relentless Apache trackers had picked up his trail and were following!

Cy Hawkins drew a deep breath, content at having discovered this in time, and fortified by knowledge of the weight of odds against him. He drew back from the crest, leading his horse across the belt of chaparral to its farther edge, where he surveyed the open ground before him, a treeless mesa, spotted with pillars of cactus and clumps of Spanish bayonet and mesquite.

He had, he figured, at least fifteen minutes start on his trackers. Upon the proper use of that small edge in time, depended the success or failure of his mission as well as the question of his own survival or death.

The first thing was to increase that small edge of time. This he promptly set about doing. He mounted his horse and circled through the chaparral, back tracked and circled again. At last he emerged in the most rocky area he could locate, knowing full well that even keen Apache eyes would have difficulty in picking up his trail on hard rock in the moonlight.

He galloped across this, circled a rocky butte and came out on more rock strewn mesa, until at last he leaped his horse across a small dry arroyo and speeded at a gallop above the bluff, back from the edge of the mesa.

This route was growing more difficult, for the draws leading down to the river were becoming larger and developing into canyons. He sought higher ground to study his back trail and at last found a small butte that rose up steeply. Tethering his horse, he climbed to the top and studied the way he had come. The moon had risen nearer its zenith and the mesa was spread out under its tricky light. He could see as far as the chaparral growth he had ridden through.

Cy felt a small glow of satisfaction at what he saw. The pursuing Apaches were still circling around in the chaparral endeavoring to straighten out on his trail. He had lost, he figured, some ten minutes in laying out that maze, and had gained at least half an hour. He hurried down to his horse, mounted and galloped on, skirting the openings of the canyons that led down to the river, seeking rocky ground and occasionally back tracking short distances and circling back.

It was when he returned to the mesa edge again, that his nose picked up the odor. It was unmistakably the sweetish, caramel like scent of baking mescal, drifting up from some one of the canyons below him.

NOW mescal, which is a species of aloe, with a heart about the size of a large turnip, is the staff of life to the wild Apache. His squaws gather it, trim off the thorny leaves and pile bushels of the hearts into mounds of rocks, on which fire is kept burning for five days. The baking brings out the sweetness and nourishment, in the hearts which are then patted out in cakes, dried on racks of poles and packed for carrying in reed or rawhide bags.

The Apaches were dependent upon the harvesting and baking of the mescal, which could not be delayed without risk of starvation, nor could the Apaches fight without the concentrated ration it supplied them in their mountain hideouts.

The odor was strong and grew stronger as Cy followed it, tracing it at last to the edge of a great canyon. There he dismounted and peered down into its depths, seeing the dull glow of many fires. Figuring the numbers of families by the fires, Cy Hawkins rose elated.

Here, without doubt, was the secret hideout of the Apaches now attacking the corral—all their squaws and children and old men and their reserve horses! This was what Captain Willard's command had set out to find, and had by-passed by a mile or two by following the beaten trail too closely. For the only way to stamp out Apache raiding was to attack their hiding places.

Cy Hawkins carefully took his bearings. It was now doubly important that he get to Hancock quickly with his tidings, for not only must the men at the corral be saved but there was an excellent chance that Christophe and his Apaches could be put out of business, permanently at the same time!

It was time to get going. Those Apaches pursuing him were as relentless as bloodhounds on the trail. With their barrel chests and mighty lungs, gained from generations of mountain living in that high dry air, they were as deadly on foot as on horseback. They could keep up a steady trot, mile after mile, and hour after hour, that would wear down a horse.

He mounted and skirted the opening to the canyon, putting his horse to a steady, mile-consuming, lope on the level going, easing the animal by dismounting and leading up hills.

Toward dawn he found a spring of water and rested for twenty minutes, after watering and feeding his mount some grain from the saddle-bags and a hatful of the figlike fruits gathered from tops of Pitaya plants.

Munching on a piece of hardtack, he stretched out on the ground, relaxing every nerve and muscle. Then, refreshed, he rose and set forth again, keeping a keen watch in all directions. He avoided the skyline, and halting below the crest of higher ground crawled up to scan his back trail and study the ground in front.

The sun rose and beat down remorselessly on rocks and sand and sagebrush, heat waves rose and distorted the outlines of shimmering buttes and rock outcroppings. With occasional halts of a few minutes each, to rest his horse, he kept on his way steadily until the noon day heat began to slow up his mount.

Hawkins selected the top of a rocky ridge, distant about a quarter of a mile, as his own lookout and resting place, and immediately dismounted. After feeding his mount, he tethered him in a hidden spot, hid his saddle and saddle-bags some distance away, and took his canteen, and rifle and sought the ridge.

Its top was covered with several trees, and it had a sort of rock wall running along it like a dyke After taking a good look at the surrounding country, he crept under some bushes, against the rock, and he was soon fast asleep. After half an hour he woke, ate a little, took a drink from his canteen and slept again.

Next time he woke up—it was suddenly, seized with a vague sense of something wrong. He looked over the hot mesa, and cast a glance at the sun beating down with diminishing vigor as it was long after midday.

Scanning the mesa carefully, he could find nothing to arouse his fears. A lone buzzard was circling calmly in the sky, a few small lizards panted on the rocks, and there was no sign of man nor beast on the desert's dusty face. He stared down at the clump of brush where he had concealed his horse but saw no movement to cause alarm. His horse undoubtedly was dozing in the heat. It was then that he heard the sound of a heavy body moving ever so slightly near him on the ridge.

It could not be a wild animal. It was undoubtedly the deadly Apache! As he was so near, Hawkins was certain that the Indian had picked up his trail and was about to take a shot at him from point blank range. He could almost feel the bullet crashing into his body! His instinct was to leap out of danger like a startled rabbit, but the training of years steadied him and he kept silent and immobile.

CHAPTER IV

Desperate Plight

BACK at the corral the heat of the sun was beginning to have its effect on the dead bodies of the horses and mules. The stench of corruption lay heavy and foul on the air.

Men were hollow eyed and weary from lack of sleep, for the Apaches had kept up a scattering of shots all night, and the threat of a sudden swift rush of yelling savages was enough to keep them from resting.

A pit had been dug for the wounded after three helpless men had been killed by chance shots. But they were not safe from further harm, even in the pit. A wounded horse fell in among them and began to thresh about in its death agony among the disabled men, who were being tended by Surgeon Thomas Leyton, himself wounded. Before the suffering animal

could be shot, its iron shod hoofs had crushed the skull of one wounded trooper and broken the arm of another.

At daylight the Apaches charged to within twenty yards of the corral, some of them shooting fire arrows at the canvas wagon covers three of which began to blaze. But sick and wounded troopers joined the firing line and the flagging spirits of the defenders rallied in a desperate hail of carbine and rifle fire until the Apaches broke and melted back into safer ground.

But there were three more troopers and a packer killed and eight more wounded, in addition to eight more horses. The troopers, seeing their favorite mounts go down one after the other, swore angrily in their helplessness. Two of them were wounded trying to find some protection for their horses.

One of the horses, his leg broken by a bullet, hobbled up to his master's rifle pit and swayed there, looking down as though begging help. The trooper, tears in his eyes, begged someone to take his revolver and put the stricken animal out of its misery. He couldn't do it himself. There were scarcely six horses left on their feet.

From time to time, the more intrepid of the Apaches crept up to within hailing distance of the troopers, some of them, speaking a little English, shouted insults.

The dead and wounded men exceeded the number still able to fight. Scarcely twenty of the latter remained and many of them were carrying painful wounds.

The long afternoon dragged through toward dusk. Forsythe staring at the hills which ringed them, shook his head.

"Looks like they're getting ready for another rush!" he said.

Captain Willard stared dully over the barricade and then let his eyes rove around the inner side, with men scattered thinly around its long perimeter, most of them silent and exhausted, some trying to snatch a minute's sleep and seeming like dead men as they sprawled there with their mouths open.

"Another rush will just about finish us!" said Willard. "Even if that loud-mouthed Texan gets through and brings help it will be too late!"

To call Cy Hawkins "loud mouthed" was somewhat unjust, seeing that he invariably spoke in a gentle drawl. But right now he was doing no talking.

It had dawned upon him that his unseen enemy was undoubtedly an Apache scout; that by a quirk of fate he had come up from the west side of the ridge to overlook the country and therefore missed seeing Cy's tracks on the eastern side. Sitting as silent as a graven image, Hawkins dared not make a movement that might startle a lizard or dislodge a small pebble.

Then he heard the faint dull tinkle that could be made only by a canvas-covered metal canteen as it bumped against a rock.

The canteen suggested to Cy that it's bearer was a reservation Apache. And the nearest Reservation Apaches were the Tontos. José, his packer, had hinted that they were rising to join Christophe's Chiricahuas. If this were the case, then this man on the far side of the rock, was a scout, for a larger war party of Tontos, who must be somewhere near at hand.

Again there came a slight sound, followed by a faint crunch of gravel. The Apache was coming down and around the rock, directly to where Hawkins was hiding!

The wall of rock jutted out to a narrow knife edge some four feet beyond where Hawkins lay. He rose silent, rifle in hand, took two noiseless strides, and as the man rounded the jutting knife edge of rock, smashed him with the rifle butt.

THE Apache collapsed, his rifle clattering to the stones. He fell backward and rolled a foot or two down the ridge to come to rest against a cactus. Moving swiftly, Hawkins leaped upon him, taking knife and tomahawk out of his belt, and tying the hands of the lank-haired, bare-chested, breech-clout-clad, Indian firmly, and carrying the still unconscious form up to the shelter of his hiding place. Depositing the Apache, Hawkins circled the ridge, studying the mesa below on all sides but seeing no trace of the man's tribesmen.

Returning he dashed water on the man's face from his canteen. The Tonto, for such he was, moved slightly, his eyelids fluttered open and he stared, uncomprehending at the face of the white man above him.

With return of further consciousness, the Tonto heard the white man speaking his own tongue, but stared at him im-

placably his beady black eyes as incurious as a snake's.

Then the white man brought forth his knife, and began suggestively to toss it from one hand to the other, occasionally testing its razor sharp edge on a hair on his forearm.

The Apache began to answer in grunting monosyllables.

Yes, he was a Reservation Tonto. His friends were nearby, down that nearest arroyo. He jerked his head toward the far side of the rock. Yes, they were on their way to join Christophe, after foregathering with others of the tribe camped in a canyon nearby, baking mescal.

So that was it! The Apaches in that canyon were not Christophe's men but Tontos, the squaws finishing up their mescal baking while most of the warriors were pulling out just before dusk to join Christophe and the Chiricahuas before the corral.

CHAPTER V

"But You Can't Tell Him Much!"

SQUATTING on his heels before the bound Apache, Cy Hawkins digested this information. He eased the man's position and allowed him to sit up. Did he know that the Long Knives from Fort Hancock would soon be here and kill Christophe and his Chiricahuas? The Tonto shook his head.

No, he stated definitely, the Long Knives would not be here—they had left Fort Hancock for the Reservation, trying to stop the Tontos, who had already left!

This was a blow. Hawkins betrayed by no flicker of a muscle how the news affected him. It meant the certain doom of the besieged forces at the corral.

He was stunned into silence for a moment, then his brain began to work. With these reinforcements of Tontos, the combined Apache force would break over the outnumbered troopers like a tidal wave, obliterating everything in their path!

How to prevent it? Time was running out. Already the sun was descending—another three hours and it would be dusk. Cy stared at the bound Tonto Apache before him, remembering the tales of blood feuds between them and the Chiricahuas and the Mezcaleros, feuds that had broken out while they were in battle against a common foe. Then the idea came to him.

The bound Tonto stared at him as Hawkins spoke Did he know José, Hawkins' packer? Sure, he knew José, who was brother of Mario, the Chief of the Tontos, now with his warriors in the canyon.

Mario, the chief, would he be angered if he knew that Christophe had killed José and thrown his head into the soldiers' corral?

The baleful glare of the bound Tonto Apache gave its own answer. An Apache would kill his own brother, but it was a matter that could only be settled by a blood feud and much killing if men from another tribe killed that same brother!

HAWKINS continued his words. Would the Tonto carry word to Mario of Christophe's slaying of his brother? Would he ride straight to the canyon without rousing his nearby friends? The Tonto's reply left no doubt that he would, if this were required.

One thing more, Hawkins pressed. Had all the Long Knives left Fort Hancock? All of them — then the Tonto frowned in thought. But there were other Long Knives coming, a small body of Buffalo Soldiers — Negro troopers — on their way to join the Long Knives at the corral.

Hawkin's eyes widened. That would be "B" Company of the Ninth Cavalry—about forty men marching through to join their regiment — someone had ordered them to detour to join Captain Willard's command! This was good, but not good enough. The forty men would be just an added sacrifice against the overwhelming force of Apaches should Chiricahuas and Tontos combine forces.

Back at the corral men watched the sun disappear behind the hills in a blood red blaze of glory, and tightened their belts in preparation for what dusk and darkness would bring.

The turmoil and preliminary movement that was a certain precursor of attack, flowed down from the hills to the listening ears of the troopers. A

tomtom began its steady throbbing, pulsing like a giant heartbeat in the lengthening shadows.

Men gathered in the rifles and carbines of the slain and loaded them, ready to hand, their faces grim. There was not a man there who figured his chances of surviving the night were anything but remote. Despite this, grim jokes went up and down the barricade and men laughed.

"Here they come!" some one sang out. The sagebrush and mesquite became alive with crouching, weaving, figures. Rifles and carbines blasted forth. High-pitched yells answered the deadly hail. Apaches dropped but others took their places. They were coming on foot, but Captain Willard pointed out the mounted men behind, waiting to dash in for the final rush that would overwhelm the white men.

The corral was ringed with fire, every man firing with chill desperation, striving to make every shot count. The extra loaded rifles and carbines were grapped up and fired until the hail of bullets rose in a deadly crescendo, a hail that made the Apaches waver and fall back. A cheer went up from the barricade, but it was short lived.

The dismounted Apaches were falling back simply to mount their horses. The mounted ones were dashing around the barricade, firing underneath their ponies' necks. More and more of them appeared, forming a great semicircle, constantly shifting and moving, but drawing in ever more closely for the final mad gallop.

The men at the barricade reloaded the heated guns. Some of them said good-by to the ones on their right and left. The three officers were prone behind the barricade, firing steadily.

"Looks like the finish!" said Willard composedly, "Sorry I let you all in for this!" He turned and began firing.

A wild yell rose from the mounted Apaches. They halted uncertainly. Some galloped back out of range. There came the bark of rifle fire from behind them. Saddles were emptied, as troopers stared astonished for a space, and then resumed firing.

Savage yells rose from out in the gathering dusk. Some kind of a fight was going on — what they did not know — but for the moment the troopers drew a breath of relief.

Then came that clear quick trumpet note, the notes of "Officers Call!", the cavalry signal, from down the valley. A cheer went up from the troopers, a cheer drowned in the roar of galloping hoofs. Dark hued horsemen of the Ninth Cavalry suddenly loomed above them — grinning and laughing. Men swarmed up. From somewhere appeared Cy Hawkins. The sound of fighting drew away and died down far up the canyon.

What had happened? Men crowded around the captain of the newly arrived troops. He referred them to Hawkins.

"Ran into this man a few hours back. Seems he'd already set the Tontos to attacking the Chiricahuas, and he hurried me up to be in at the finish."

Captain Willard sought out Cy Hawkins, "Guess I've got apology and thanks to give." The Captain cleared his throat. "I've been calling you a Texas loudmouth, but you've proved me wrong twice. On my third move you're not going to prove me wrong."

"Pshaw, Captain, ain't no cause for apologies or thanks. But what's your third move, Suh?" Cy asked curiously.

"I'm going to recommend you for the Medal of Honor and a commission as lieutenant of cavalry!"

Cy was nonplussed and embarrassed, and sought for words. It was Forsythe who supplied them.

"You can always tell a Texan — " he said.

"But you cain't tell him much! Go along with you, Loot'nent, I've heard that one before!"

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If you liked this story by Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, you will also enjoy THE MEDICINE MAN, an Indian-fighting novelet by the same author which is among the many headliners in the May issue of our action-packed companion magazine THRILLING WESTERN — now on sale, only 15c per copy at all newsstands!

"Hands up," Ruth said grimly, "and don't try anything!"

THE DRIFTER

By CLARK GRAY

Because Jim used to be an outlaw, his town thought he still was, and then he got the chance—to prove they were right!

THE DOC sighed and gently lifted the sheet till it covered Mary's face.

Jim Purcell, watching, realized with a kind of stunned despair that the gesture marked a period to the happiest chapter of his life. He got out of his chair and crossed the floor, a giant hulk of a man with bitter failure in the droop of his massive shoulders.

At the door he stood staring at the fiery red ball of the sun that sank below the scorched prairie. He felt no sorrow. He had known for weeks that Mary was going to die.

Now he had only that numbed despair. He heard the faint whimper of the baby in the next room, and the sound stirred no emotion in him. He and Mary had never even had time to name the baby.

He leaned against the door jamb and watched the sun, thinking that although

he had not loved Mary, he would miss her now.

For she had steadied him, an anchor against his reckless drifting. She had loved him, with a deep patient love he could not hurt. So he had played his role of faithful, stolid husband for her sake, and in the playing he had found peace.

And now, he thought numbly, she was gone. A hand touched his shoulder gently.

"I'm sorry," the Doc said. "I did all I could, son."

"Fergit it," Jim Purcell said harshly.

He left the house and stalked across the yard to pull the shovel from the tool shed. He stood an instant, forcing deliberate thought about the job ahead. He remembered she had always loved the pale pink blossoms of the rose bush. He moved up beside the bush and began to dig.

"You ain't gonna bury her now?" he heard the Doc's astonished question. "Ain't you gonna have no funeral, son?"

"Funeral?" Jim said, and he stared grimly at the Doc. "Who the devil would come to my wife's funeral!"

DOC'S furrowed, weather-beaten face puckered a little in the sunset glare. Somberly he shook his head.

"You got the town wrong, Jim. Sure, they don't like you. You're an outlaw —or used to be. And a penitentiary record don't help. But they ain't *that* cold-blooded!"

Jim Purcell didn't answer. He bent his head and went back to digging, and after a while he heard the Doc climb in his buggy and leave. Jim continued digging without looking up. When he had the grave deep enough he got a hammer and knocked together a wooden casket out of the crates in which they'd shipped his plow and harrow from the mail-order house.

He buried Mary, and when it was done he stood a long time over the fresh, raw earth. He was saying good-by, not only to Mary, but to the quiet, decent life she had given him. Finally he returned to the house.

The baby was screaming with hunger now, and he poured the last of the milk into the bottle, warmed it a while in a saucepan on the stove. He was so dead to feeling that he had no hint of pride when he cradled his son in brawny arms and let him take the bottle. . . .

Blackjack City was dark under a high scudding moon when he stepped his horse quietly down its sandy side streets. He was carrying the sleeping baby in its basket, an awkward load for man on horseback.

Earlier, eating his lonely supper, he had made his plans. He would drift away from this, as he had always drifted. As he always would drift, he knew. But first he must cut the ties that bound him here. Peering intently now at the dark frame houses, he located the slim spire of the church touching a pointed finger to the moon. He dismounted and approached the parsonage.

The Rev. Royal Thomas answered his knock in bare feet and a nightgown that clung tight to his soft paunch. Thomas's eyes widened and fear flitted across his pudgy features, then he saw the baby and understanding came to him. He stood aside. Jim Purcell entered.

Mrs. Thomas was lighting a lamp, clutching a faded purple robe about her skinny body. Her hair was tousled, and her thin lips were bloodless. But when she saw the baby, pity filled her eyes.

Jim Purcell said gruffly, "I brung you my baby. I didn't know where else to take him."

Rev. Royal Thomas's pale eyes widened. He spluttered, "Y-you mean—for good?"

"You're church people," Jim Purcell answered harshly. "Don't it say somethin' in the Bible about takin' care of orphans?"

"Yes," Thomas admitted. He mopped his face with his nightcap. "Yes, but—"

"Of *course*, it does," Mrs. Thomas interrupted. Her eyes were shining. "We'll take him, Jim. We'll keep for you till you want him back."

"Thanks," Jim said. He put on his hat and turned to go.

"But—but where—" He saw her hesitate. He knew she wanted to ask where he was going, but she flushed and said instead, "What's his name?"

"I dunno." Then he remembered something Mary had mentioned once. "Why, I guess we'll call him Jim. Young Jim Purcell after his old man."

HE TIED his horse this time in front of the Blackjack City Saloon, the only lighted building on Main Street

except the hotel. One more errand, he thought grimly, and then he would be free. He pushed through the batwings and strode across the noisy, crowded floor, conscious that men quieted a little and unwilling sympathy came to their eyes.

But he wanted no sympathy. Somberly he leaned against the bar and raised two fingers to the bartender. He got his drink and hoisted it in his hand, looking at his reflection in the bar mirror.

He was a big man, a giant almost. It was his size that had given him away when he and Kit Williams had tried to slip quietly through a town they'd robbed only a month before. He had served five years for that, and prison had left its mark. He could see it now in the way his own eyes burned at him from the bar mirror. In the pale scar-splotches on his temple, the trail of a guard's brass knuckles.

Then he saw a face appear over his shoulder in the mirror, and "Fat" Haskell's hand touched him.

"Howdy, Jim," Fat said. "Sorry to hear about your wife."

Jim swallowed his drink and turned. Fat Haskell was the saloon owner, as well as ramrod of a half-dozen other enterprises, some of them legal. The man looked as if he had been carved from butter with a spoon. Every line of him was curved, and his fatness, Jim knew, was only the outward indication of insatiable greed. Fat Haskell would do anything, literally anything, for money.

"Fergit my wife," Jim grunted. "You still want to buy my spread?"

"Sure." Fat's yellowish eyes glittered momentarily, then he went carefully dead-pan. "But I took some heavy losses lately. I'll have to cut my first offer by about three bucks an acre."

"I figgered that," Jim answered dryly. He knew Fat was taking advantage of his desire to sell quick, but he didn't care enough to argue. "Okay, blast yore graspin' soul. Fix up the deed."

"I got it in my pocket," Fat said quickly. "When I heard the news about Mary, I figgered you'd be around."

He produced a deed. Jim scowled in distaste at the fat saloonman and scrawled his name to the sheet. Fat got the cash from the cashier—it amounted to a little over a thousand dollars—and paid off then and there. Then he offered Jim another drink.

"What you aim to do now, son? They might be some odd jobs around."

Jim shook his head. "Not your kind of jobs, Fat. I'm through with the owlhoot. That's what I learned from Mary. I'm ridin' out to Texas. Reckon I'll end up bustin' broncs at five dollars a head." He shrugged. "What's the difference?"

"You hear Kit's in town?" Fat asked.

"Kit?" He looked at him quickly. "Kit Williams? I thought he went out to California."

"He's back," Fat said. "Been back a month now. He got a straw-boss job out at Luke Chaplain's Cray C. Reckon he'd been out to see yuh, but he know'd Mary was sick."

Jim Purcell lighted a cigarette, thinking. He and Kit Williams had been wild cubs together. It had been Kit, he knew, who had sparked that first wild urge to owlhoot. Kit had been the brains, and he, Jim, had tailed along because he admired Kit's dash and envied his gaudy clothes and gaudier women. He had tailed Kit through a dozen bank robberies and an express job, and then he had tailed him into the pen.

SO NOW, he reflected, Kit was back. A flicker of the old wildness came to him like a fragile scent from the past, and for the first time in days he smiled a little. Siding Kit had always been a thrilling game, with high stakes for the taking. Mary, he remembered, had never been able to understand the way he felt about Kit.

He asked, "He come here often?"

"Every night," Fat answered. He lifted a beefy arm and pointed toward the batwings. "In fact, there's his crowd now."

Four or five nondescript punchers drifted through the batwings, and then Jim saw Kit. Kit stood with one hand on the door, talking over his shoulder to someone in the darkness behind him. Kit had on a white Stetson pushed back from his freckled face, and he was grinning. Kit was always grinning, Jim remembered.

He set down his shot glass and pushed away from the bar, and a flicker of anticipation thrilled through him. He strode across the floor just as Kit stepped back into the darkness and dropped the batwing, still talking.

Jim pushed through the batwing and

stood blinking in the sudden blackness till he located Kit. Kit stood in the dim glow from the saloon window, talking to a girl. Jim Purcell smiled and moved sideways against the dark wall, listening.

"You've done it again!" The girl's voice shook with indignation. "You've brought the hands into this place to lose their money, even after dad forbid it. You—you'll pay for this, Kit Williams."

Jim could see her faintly. She had yellow hair that shimmered like a field of new-ripe oats. Her slender figure, richly feminine in a man's shirt and Levis, brought him a pang. He thought of Mary.

"Aw, Ruth," Kit Williams said. "I couldn't help it. You can't tell a man where he can spend his wages. That ain't right."

Jim Purcell smiled in the darkness, knowing very well that Kit was receiving a rake-off from Fat Haskell for bringing the Crazy C hands here to buck Fat's gambling tables. He shoved away from the wall and moved forward.

"Hope I ain't interruptin' nothin', Kit."

Kit Williams whirled, and something flashed in his hand. Then Jim strode into the window light and Kit's mouth dropped, and he shoved his gun back in holster and shouted.

"Jim! You ring-tailed son of a hook-nosed blacksmith!"

Kit seized his shoulders and swung him around in a wild war dance. Jim grinned, then. Kit was always like this. Always excited about something, always ready to let loose and lift the roof off.

"Son," Kit shouted, "have I been needin' you!" He halted, jerked a thumb at the girl who stood watching coldly. "This here's Ruth Chaplain, daughter to old man Luke. She's purty, boy, but she's half dynamite and half Arkansaw mule. Miss Ruth, meet Jim Purcell."

"I know him," Ruth Chaplain said icily. The corners of her mouth quirked, and she spoke in bitter sarcasm. "Quite a reunion, isn't it? Were you two cellmates, by any chance?"

KIT'S freckled face fell in mock hurt. "Now that ain't fair, Ruth. Ain't I told you we wuz framed? You done hurt Jim's feelin's." He turned to Jim. "How's the better half, son?"

Jim sobered, and once again he felt the savage pang.

"She died today," he said gruffly.

"Oh!" The girl, Ruth, gazed at Jim in sudden pity. "Oh, I—I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"Fergit it," Jim grunted, and he glanced at Kit. "I jest sold my spread to Fat. If you finished yore business with the lady, I'll buy the drinks."

"Shore," Kit said, and his freckled face flashed in another grin. "That's what you need, son. I'm right sorry to hear about your wife, too, but they ain't nothin' like blabbin' about old times to make a man feel good again. Come on."

Kit led him through the saloon proper into a back room where he pulled two chairs to a table lighted by a smoky, green-shaded lamp. In the light now Jim saw that Kit looked older, more haggard. Prison had left its mark on Kit, too.

Kit's blue eyes had paled, and there was a cold intensity in them that Kit didn't like. And Kit's reddish mop of hair had thinned. Kit took off his hat and flung it on the table.

"That wench bothers me, Jim," he growled. "Hang her, she's too clever. I got just one job to pull, then I'm leavin' this dump for Californy." He sat down, raking his spurs across the table top. Then the savagery faded from his eyes and he grinned. "Californy! That's the place for us, kid. They's more easy money there than in the mint, and some of it's got our names on it."

Jim sat silent, rolling a cigarette. He hated to admit that Kit Williams could still cast a spell over him, but it was so. He stifled the vague excitement that stirred in him and lighted his cigarette as the barkeep brought two glasses and a bottle. When the barkeep had gone he said:

"I'm off the owlhoot, Kit. For good."

Kit smiled, and the old persuasiveness returned to his voice as he poured the drinks.

"Listen, son. Old man Chaplain lost a pile of dinero in the crash of 'Eighty-Three. So he don't believe in banks no more, an' he's got a tin can of a safe in his headquarters that's so full of hundred-dollar bills it bulges. I figger to bust that safe and then heat my axles west. I owe Fat a couple hundred for the information, and I'll split the rest with you if you'll help me out and then come along. We'll prize up excitement from Mexico to Canada, kid. What say?"

"No," Jim answered harshly. "I'm through, Kit. I mean it."

He gulped his drink and rose, knowing now that his close friendship with Kit was gone.

"I ain't had much to eat lately," he said, "what with Mary sick. I think I'll git a bait on ham and eggs, then bed down in the hotel. You wanna come along?"

Kit's face was anxious. "You really do mean it, don't yuh, son? Won't change yore mind, eh?"

"If I do, I'll let you know."

"Okay." Kit shrugged, then grinned again. "I'll miss yuh. Reckon I'll stay here and ride herd on my crew. Drop back around for a nightcap."

"Maybe," Jim said as he pulled on his hat. But he didn't think he would see Kit Williams again.

THE hotel dining room was still open, and Ruth Chaplain sat disconsolately drinking coffee, the only customer at this hour. With a brief nod he strode past her toward the counter, but she called him.

"Sit here, Jim. I want to tell you something."

He didn't want to talk to her. The pain of Mary's death was still too close. But with a shrug he dropped his hat on the hatrack and took a seat at her table.

"I've been thinking," she began, dropping her eyes to her coffee cup, "about Mary. You see, I went to school with her."

A faint flush tinted her tanned skin. This was costing her something, he saw. He noted irrelevantly her nose was sunburned and peeling. He stretched his legs under the table and tried to ignore the dull ache of thinking about Mary.

"She was a strange girl," Ruth Chaplain continued. "She was not pretty, and she knew it. All the teachers petted me, and I had so many boy friends I almost had to fight them off. But nobody ever took Mary buggy riding—or to a dance. She was starved for affection. She used to keep stray dogs and cats and pamper them like children."

She paused, and when she raised her eyes there were soft tears in them.

"She loved you, Jim Purcell. She told me so just before you were married. You made her happy for the first time in her life. I—I—when I talked sharp to you out there, I didn't mean it. Nobody who had made Mary happy could—could be wholly bad."

Jim was strangely moved. For the first time since his arrest someone other than Mary was treating him as a decent human instead of a convict. He felt his own throat fog, and he fiddled with a fork on the table and spoke gruffly, harshly:

"I was no good for her. If she hadn't had that baby, she wouldn't have died."

"She wanted to have that baby," Ruth Chaplain said fiercely. "She died happy because she had your baby. Don't torture yourself, Jim."

It was a new idea to him. He had not thought he was torturing himself. He looked up and the waitress was approaching. Suddenly he was not hungry, and he got to his feet. She looked at him questioningly.

"Where are you going now?"

"I don't know," he said. But the idea of riding out still clung to him. "I reckon I'll head for Texas. Good-by, Ruth. And—thanks."

He stood in the dark shadows of Main Street, smoking and thinking. He hadn't gotten his hotel room yet. He had a sudden urge to ride out now, this minute, before he changed his mind. The thought of his son came to him. Young Jim. The boy would never know his father, never know that there was the stigma of a jailbird on him. The thought hurt, somehow, and yet he told himself it was better this way. He threw away his cigarette and started toward the hitchrail at the Blackjack City Saloon.

He reached his horse, and then the impulse came to have one more drink with Kit Williams. Somehow Kit had always managed to soften his pain, and the pain of losing Mary was cutting deep now. Almost without thinking he crossed the boardwalk and stepped through the batwings.

KIT grinned at him from the crowded bar, shoved his white Stetson off a sweating forehead and beckoned with his thumb. Jim threaded across the room.

"The drinks are on me, son," Kit said. "Me'n Fat done decided to go to work tonight on that business I told you about."

Kit was a little drunk, Jim saw. He smiled and took the glass the barkeep handed up. He had his drink.

"Thanks, Kit," he said. "Good luck," and pulled down his hat. But Kit put a hand on his shoulder.

"Whatsa matter, son? Shucks, I ain't seen you since we wuz bad boys together. You ain't gettin' uppity, are yuh?"

Kit's freckled face was sober, for once, and his blue eyes were hurt. Jim felt a pang of remorse. After all, he and Kit *had* been sidekicks for a long time. And it was ending now.

He turned back to the bar and forced a grin.

"Well, no, Kit. I ain't never refused to drink with you yet. Swaller down that coffin varnish, boy, and have another."

He woke in darkness. He turned his head and groaned at the agony the movement brought him. He had made a mistake, he knew now. A bad mistake.

He wondered where he was. He remembered the wild drinking, the kind he and Kit had done years ago in the early days. He remembered that Kit and Fat Haskell had held a whispered conversation, then more drinking. And there his memory faded into blank.

He staggered to his feet, knowing now that Kit had doped his drink. The throbbing in his head shook him like a fit of fever. Blindly he groped for a match and struck it. The pale flare sent savage pain through his eyes, but he looked around and saw double decker bunks rising against one wall. He was in a bunkhouse, then. A lamp stood on a far table.

Grimly he lighted the lamp and took stock. The thousand-dollar roll of bills Fat Haskell had given him was still in his pocket. He still had his gun.

A bucket of water stood by the door, and he stumbled toward it. He drank till the parched dryness went from his throat, then used some more of the water to splash the salt sweat from his eyes. He felt a little better, and he picked up his hat from the floor and started for the door.

The door opened before he reached it. Fat Haskell moved in sideways, his enormous paunch squeezing past the jamb. Behind him came Kit Williams, carrying a half-full gunny sack. Then Jim understood.

He was at Luke Chaplain's Crazy C!

Kit and Fat had evidently carried out their plan to rob the old man's safe. For some reason they had brought him along. He felt the first faint stirrings of rage. Why had they done it? He was likely to get in trouble with the law again!

Kit set down the gunny sack and grinned. The wild gay light had returned to his blue eyes now, and when he took off his white Stetson his reddish hair glistened in the lamplight.

"Howdy, son," Kit said. "We didn't want you to miss a chance like this, so we fetched you, too."

BEFORE Jim could answer, the door behind Kit opened and Ruth Chaplain stood framed there. She held a gun in her hand. The gun shook a little in her rigid fingers. Her face was stiff, white with determination.

"Hands up," she said grimly through tight lips. "And don't try anything, or I'll shoot you down like rats."

Kit Williams cursed and whirled, and Fat Haskell's yellow forehead suddenly turned greasy with sweat. Kit stood uncertainly a moment, then his face contorted savagely and cat-like he threw the gunny sack. The sack slammed the girl's gun-arm, knocking her back against the wall.

Jim Purcell fought surprise and shock and tried to move, but Kit Williams was already across the room, jerking the gun from the girl's hand, and she was screaming, clawing at him like a wildcat.

Kit retreated backwards with the gun. She followed, and he had to shove her away from him. He shoved her hard, and she hurtled across the room and Kit shouted frantically, "Git her, Fat!"

Fat Haskell's greasy face was an agony of indecision. Fat held out his pudgy arms to catch her, but she turned quickly and fought him like a savage animal. Fat's eyes turned green with despair, and frantically he fumbled for his gun. He got it, slashed viciously at Ruth Chaplain. She moaned, and collapsed to the floor.

Jim Purcell found his voice then. A savage stab of rage pulsed through him.

"You fool," he breathed. "You crazy fool."

He strode across the floor and hunkered beside her. He lifted her head. The thick yellow hair had afforded some protection from the blow, but already thickish red matted her scalp. Grimly he glanced up at Fat Haskell, then got his handkerchief and dabbed at the wound. He fumbled for her pulse. It was faint.

He wondered bitterly if she were dying.

"We got to kill her," Fat Haskell shrilled. Sweat dripped from his yellow, fear-struck face. "We got to kill her, or she'll spill the whole story. I'll be ruined!"

"You're ruined," Jim Purcell heard himself say then, "whether you kill her or not, Fat. They'll hunt you down like a coyote for doin' this to a woman. You ignorant dog, why'd you do it?"

It was a foolish question, he knew. Fat had done it in panic. Jim got to his feet and fumbled for his makings, struggling to control his fury. He had to think fast now, he told himself. This was trouble, serious trouble. There'd be time for anger later.

"Where's the old man?" he grunted. "And the hands? You better talk fast, Kit. We got to do somethin' fer this girl."

Kit Williams licked his lips, and his blue eyes went haggard again. He ran a shaking hand through his thin red hair.

"The old man's okay," he grunted. "He's locked in his room. We left the hands in town. The gamblers and the dance-hall girls are takin' care of 'em till mornin'."

"All right," Jim said. He twisted his cigarette together and lighted it, frowning at the bluish smoke. "Who's goin' to take her to the Doc? Can I get into town without the sheriff jumpin' me, Kit? Or did you frame this safe robbery on me?"

REGRET crept into Kit William's freckled face. "I—I reckon we did you wrong, son. We trailed your hoss out here. I wanted you to come to Californy with me. I was goin' to give you half the profits of this deal. I just wanted to fix it so's you'd have to come. You wasn't yourself, Jim, with yore wife just buried. I know'd you'd change your mind later, but it might be too late then. I—I figgered it was what you'd really want—some day."

Kit Williams was telling the truth, Jim saw. Kit had a flaw, a fault in the way he looked at life. A queer streak that perhaps all lifetime outlaws had, Jim thought. Kit had framed him, but with only the friendliest of motives. Funny!

Jim straightened and threw away his cigarette. "Go git me a buggy, Kit," he ordered. "I'll drive her to the Doc. You and Fat better hit the trail for Mexico, and don't stop. If she dies, old Luke'll never stop doggin' you till he gits you or you git him."

He faced them both, slowly letting his fury show through now. This was his time for decision, he knew. He moved his hand a fraction of an inch toward the holster on his hip.

"And," he said grimly, "you better leave that gunnysack of money here."

Fat Haskell's butter-yellow face turned purple then. He lifted his giant arms and dropped them and said:

"You loony jailbird! What you tryin' to pull?"

"Not a thing!" Jim didn't move. "With my hoss tracks out here I'll likely end up behind bars fer this myself, and you know it. But I don't aim to stand by and see you strip old man Chaplain. I ain't no lawman, but I ain't no owlhoot no more, neither."

Fat Haskell snarled, his purple face a mask of hate. He moved forward like a gorilla then, arms swinging in instinctive animal rage.

Savagely Jim Purcell drew his gun and backed away from the girl and growled.

"Stand back!"

Fat Haskell kept on coming, his blubbery lips twisting.

Grimly Jim shot him through the shoulder. The bullet made a dull thud.

The bullet turned Haskell's mountainous body half around, but he only lurched doggedly and kept on coming, with a crazy glitter in his yellow eyes.

Jim shot him again. Through Haskell's paunch this time, but Fat Haskell was on him now, wrapping giant arms around him. Desperately Jim shot him again, again, and as Haskell fell he glimpsed Kit Williams coming.

Kit's gun was out and Kit's lips were lifting from his teeth in a snarl. Kit was circling for a shot, and Jim knew now that Kit had turned against him at last.

Frantically he twisted, but then Kit was shooting. One bullet burned a streak of fire up his shoulder, then plunked into Fat Haskell's blubbery body half atop him. A second bullet sang past his ear.

Then he was free from Haskell and on his feet as another gun sounded from somewhere.

Kit Williams began folding in the middle. He clutched a hand to his belt buckle, and blood trickled thinly

through his fingers. His eyes were round with surprise. He kept folding slowly till his forehead touched the floor, then he crumpled sideways in a heap.

WILDLY Jim looked around for the source of that strange shot.

And he saw Ruth Chaplain propped on one elbow, with her own gun in her hand. She turned from Kit with a slight shudder, and her gaze sought Jim's eyes. . . .

A half hour later the grizzled Doc stalked from his house toward where Jim was waiting nervously in the street. The Doc's weather-beaten face was cast into long shadows by the lantern he carried. Jim saw the Doc's grin, and a great relief welled through him.

"She'll be good as ever tomorrow," the Doc grunted. "You've had a busy day, ain't you, son? Now you go in and see her. She wants to talk about somethin'."

She lay with her golden hair spread like a halo on the pillow. She was pale, but she managed a smile as he entered hesitantly and pulled a chair beside her.

"I want to tell you," she said, "that I wasn't unconscious at all after Fat hit me. I heard the whole thing. I must thank you. I'll tell the whole town tomorrow what you've done." Her eyes shone. "You're quite a man, Jim Purcell."

He shifted uneasily in his chair, twisting his hat in his hands. And then she said something else.

"I understand," she half whispered, "why Mary was so proud of you."

The thought of Mary came back to him then, but with no pain in it. He thought of what Ruth Chaplain had said in the hotel dining room that evening, and he knew it was true. Mary *had* wanted to have his baby. He remembered how in the rare painless moments of her illness she had shown him the happiness in her eyes.

It was funny, he thought, how things worked out. In one day he had lost his wife and his best friend.

For in spite of his weaknesses, Kit *had* been his best friend. He put it into words.

"I hate it about Kit. He and I were buddies."

"Once," she answered gently, "but no more. Kit never grew up, Jim. But you did."

Maybe she was right again, he thought. She had been right about him so often.

Dimly then he began to see a future for himself. He had tried to run away this afternoon. But he would not run away any more. Suddenly he thought of his baby son, and he reflected that a baby needed his father. And a mother, too. No baby ought to be without a mother.

He glanced at Ruth Chaplain smiling at him. He could not rush things. There had to be a certain time.

He owed it to Mary to begin a new life slowly.

But some day—

He sighed and got to his feet.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Why," he said, and he returned her smile. "I might go down to preacher Thomas's house. To get my son."

"I Never Thought I'd See the Day When Reb Quartermane Would Holler for Help—but I Can't Buck Uncle Sam by Myself!"

FOR the first time in his checkered career as a Confederate officer, buffalo hunter and Montana cattle baron, Reb Quartermane saw defeat and disaster staring him in the face. He'd shipped a thousand head of prime cattle to Fort Shoshone—but when they arrived, the cattle were gaunt, inferior stock. And he was suspected of running a blazer on the Army—which had a clear-cut case of fraud against him!

Quartermane appealed to the CPA—and Steve Reese was assigned to tackle the mystery. How he does so is revealed in THE HERD FROM NOWHERE, a novel by Walker A. Tompkins which packs action and excitement on every page. It's a smashing, two-fisted drama of the range that will hold you breathless from start to finish. Look forward to it in the next issue!

TRAIL CAMP

(Continued from page 8)

third and Eddie Guy fourth. Sonny Lavender was top man in the bull riding, Fess Reynolds was second, Dale Adams was third and Billy Bockman fourth.

One incident during the finals of this rodeo proved that a little bit of time counts a lot. In the finals of the steer wrestling, the difference in the prize for first and second places was several hundred dollars, and Buck Dowell won first prize over Bill Lowry by exactly one fifth of a second!

New York Results

Here are the final official results of the World's Championship Rodeo in Madison Square Garden, New York, together with the total time made in the time events and points awarded by the judges in scoring the winners in the riding events.

Bareback bronc riding, total score on 15 horses: 1st, Jim Shoulders, 4460 points; 2nd, Tater Decker, 4422; 3rd, Bill Linderman, 4146; 4th, Jake Monroe 4132; 5th, Dude Smith, 4131; 6th, Jim Like, 4125.

The score in saddle bronc riding, total points on 15 horses: 1st, Tater Decker, 4169; 2nd, Bill Linderman, 4148; 3rd, Buster Ivory, 4082; 4th, Bill Weeks, 4066; 5th, Casey Tibbs, 3974; 6th, Carl Olsen, 3922.

In the bull riding, total points on 15 bulls: 1st, Jim Shoulders, 3864; 2nd, Harry Tomkins, 3311; 3rd, Todd Whatley, 3310; 4th, Glen Tyler, 2631; 5th, Orie Dooley, 2614; 6th, Charlie Beals, 2370.

In the calf roping, total seconds on 14 calves: 1st, Toots Mansfield, 324.2; 2nd, Zeano Ferris, 344.4; 3rd, Troy Fort, 349.1; 4th, Tom Taylor, 355.3; 5th, Shoat Webster, 356.1; 6th, Don McLaughlin, 392.4.

In the steer wrestling, total seconds on 11 steers: 1st, Lee Roberts, 193.3; 2nd, Howard McCrory, 195.3; 3rd, Todd Whatley, 197.1; 4th, Barney Willis, 201.1; 5th, Norman Person, 211.1; 6th, Dub Phillips, 244.3.

News of Rodeo Folks

Buddy Mefford, fancy roper, with the JE Ranch Rodeo for several years, was married to Miss Anna Louise Edwards, of Endicott, New York, at Kissimmee, Florida. Both the bride and groom are well known in rodeo

[*Turn page*]

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circles and have a host of friends who will wish them much happiness. They will reside in Kissimmee.

A veteran rodeo bronc rider rode on to the last roundup in Kansas City, Missouri. He was Floyd Shumaker, 45 years old, a former great bareback and saddle bronc rider. Floyd was born in Two Dott, Montana, was a veteran of both world wars, had lived around Kansas City for the past thirteen years and had been on the Kansas City police force. His death came after a short illness and burial was in Harlowtown, Montana.

Tim Holt, moving picture star, of Hollywood, California, has purchased an interest in the Lamar-Jennings Rodeo Producing organization of Norman, Oklahoma, and will take an active part in its management in producing rodeos this year. He will act as arena director for the organization's rodeos and will also work with the publicity departments of their committees, making radio appearances, speaking before luncheon clubs, and making booster trips and personal appearances.

The organization has already bought quite a bit of stock to be added to their already large string, and Holt is making a round of meeting rodeo committees in the territory mapped out for their coming rodeo activities.

Quite a number of rodeo folks wintered in Florida and took part in the winter rodeos of the state. Among them were Buddy Mefford and wife, Clayton Hart and wife, Chip Morris and wife, Jack Kennedy and wife, Fred M. Clancy, Jr. and wife Edith and son Chip, Buck Dowell and wife Carrol, Eddie Guy and wife, and Billy Keen.

Abe Lefton, rodeo announcer, is reported to be taking a three months' rest at his home in Hollywood. Abe became ill while acting as the announcer at the Madison Square Garden Rodeo. John Jordon, of Chandler, Arizona, flew into New York and relieved Abe, announcing the last six days of the New York show and going on to Boston for the rodeo there, at which Abe had previously been engaged to announce. Lefton returned from New York to California and was told by his physician that he needed at least three months' rest. Abe expects to be announcing rodeos again shortly.

Boston Garden Show

The rodeo produced at the end of last season by the World's Championship Rodeo Corporation, Gene Autry and Associates, with Gene as guest star at Boston Garden, got away to a slow start in attendance, but picked up and finished well. Everett E. Colborn was managing director. Music was furnished by James Cimmeron's Cowboy Band, with Ray Whitley and the Cass County and Melody Ranch Boys furnishing the musical background for Autry's singing numbers. Fred Alvord was arena secretary, Eddie Curtis and Carl Dossey judges, Tad Lucas, Gene Pruitt and A. T. Hart timers, Alvin Gordon chute boss, John Jordon announcer. Fancy Ropers were Buff Brady, Vern Goodrich and Don McLaughlin, with Jack Knapp doing a comedy roping number. Trick riders were Mitzi Lucas Riley, Faye Blessing, Don Wilcox, Nancy Kelley, Nancy Bragg and Buff Brady. The clowns were George Mills, Jasbo Fulkerson and Jack Knapp.

The final results in bareback bronc riding were: First, Casey Tibbs; Second, Jim Like; Third, Clinton Hill; Fourth, Jesse Like. Toots Mansfield won the calf roping, Zeano Ferris was second, J. D. Holleyman was third, and Lanham Riley was fourth. Casey Tibbs copped the saddle bronc riding, Tom Knight was second, Buster Ivory was third and Jesse Like fourth.

Dub Phillips was best man in the steer wrestling, Mickey McCrory was second, Howard McCrory was third and Wilbur Plougher fourth. Ken Roberts was best man in the bull riding, Jim Shoulders was second, Bill Weeks was third and Johnny Chapman fourth.

Well, cowhands, guess that about winds up another Trail Camp and we will get the little dogies strung out on the trail again. Be seein' you at the next Trail Camp. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

TOUGH old Reb Quatermane, boss of the big Slash Q outfit in Montana, was under contract to furnish beef to the United States Army. He put a thousand head of prime steers—fine, fat beef—onto the cars at the Latigo loading point and saw them on their way to Fort Shoshone.

The run was comparatively short. But the thousand head which arrived at the Fort's holding pens were scrawny, ganted-up, hide-and-taller critters with not enough fat on them to grease a six-gun. They were a plumb sorry mess of meat, and the Army refused to accept them. They not only re-

fused, but Major Otis Karbow, in command, informed Quatermane that unless he could explain the shipment of such an impossible lot of animals he would probably lose his contract and in addition face prosecution in the courts for an attempt to defraud the U. S. Army.

Old Reb Quatermane—he had been a brevet captain with General Beauregard's Confederates in the Civil War—rared right up and roared when he got the wire telling him the shipment had been refused. He stormed into Fort Shoshone, barged into Major Karbow's orderly room and bellowed a question at the regimental sergeant-major.

"Where's that Yankee carpetbagger who ramrods this post?"

Strong talk, up there in Montana, but Quatermane was the kind who could get away with it. When a civilian, in rough range clothes, can make an Army sentry jump to attention and throw him a salute, he is no ordinary man. He got into Karbow's office, and the C. O., who had once fought as a Union officer against Quatermane's detachment of Tennessee volunteers, waved him to a chair.

[*Turn page*]

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"I'll say what I got to say standin' up, you danged blue-nose Yankee!" the old rebel stormed. "Three weeks ago, I shipped out a thousand head of prime shorthorn beef critters from my Slash Q, consigned to Fort Shoshone. I'm here to collect for 'em."

But he didn't. The major liked and respected his old enemy, and he called him by his nickname, "Reb." But when they went out together and took a look at the cattle in the holding pens, Quatermane stared in amazement.

"Them ain't the steers I loaded at Latigo!" he declared. "My Slash Q cattle were rollin' in fat. The pick of my roundup is always reserved for the U. S. iron."

Not the steers he loaded at Latigo! But believing that and proving it were two different things. Right then, old Reb Quatermane, who had never asked help before, hollered for the aid of the CPA. And that was where Steve Reese entered the picture, along with Hank Ball and Dusty Trail. And right then the action speeded from a walk to a lope, and from a lope to a dead run. Fast action, hard, tight riding, danger and death. If you like a yarn that really gits up and hightails, then Walker A. Tompkins' novel, THE HERD FROM NOWHERE, is your meat!

Of course, Reese and his boys headed at once for Montana, and, on rented horses, rode toward the Slash Q. At one point they had to cross the Milk River, swollen by spring freshets. Says the story—

The three horsemen were lined out in single file when they hit midstream, the sluicing current foaming around their horses' bellies, with Hank Ball in the lead and Dusty Trail in the rear, sandwiching Reese in the middle.

They rode with knees hooked over pommels in the event the gravel went into a channel and forced their animals to swim. Intent on holding their mounts to the ford, which might be narrower than they knew, steering for the ruts on the north bank, the riders from Texas did not catch the blur of movement in the quaking aspen thickets which rimmed the cutbank they were approaching.

The flat whipcrack of a rifle shot was their

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first intimation of danger. Hank Ball emitted a wild yell of dismay as his roan saddler slumped under him, its skull drilled dead center by a steel-jacketed slug.

Before Hank could haul his .30-30 saddle gun from its boot, the redhead was flung into the river as his mount went under. With his view thus cleared, Steve Reese caught sight of a spurt of white gunsmoke wafting away from a quaker bush dead ahead and off to the right of the section line wagon road.

"Hank's leg is caught in the stirrup, Doc!" came Dusty Trail's yell, as the big fellow snaked his Winchester from scabbard. "I'll take care of that drygulchin' son up ahead—"

It was true. Hank Ball broke surface in a smother of spume, gagged out a yell for help and then was jerked under as the weight of his slain horse was tugged out into deep water by the relentless current.

Steve Reese reined his steel-dust gelding off the ford and jerked feet from stirrups, diving into the water in the direction where he had last seen Hank Ball. As his head cleft the icy stream, Reese heard a sharp exchange of gunfire as Dusty Trail opened up with his .45-70 on the fast-shooting bushwhacker on the north bank.

Swimming hard, Reese felt his body brush against the submerged carcass of Hank's saddler, being dragged over the river bottom by a back eddy. Opening his eyes in the muddy swirl, Reese vaguely saw his red-headed partner fighting to free a spike-heeled Coffeyville from the oxbow stirrup in which his foot was wedged.

Reese's lungs were bursting for want of air when he finally tore Hank Ball's leg free of the trap. He clamped an arm around his half drowned companion and struck out for the surface.

Their heads bobbed into view downstream, and Reese caught sight of Dusty Trail splashing his horse ashore on the north bank. The rifle on Dusty's shoulder was hammering its death song as the big CPA man, ignoring the threat of ambush lead, carried the fight straight toward his hidden adversary in the aspen thickets.

Who was the gent in the bushes? What happened to him, and to Reese and his pals?

[*Turn page*]

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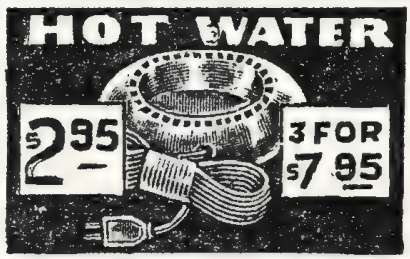

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Things were startin' to get hot up there in that Montana country—a heck of a lot hotter than the icy water in which Reese and Hank Ball were floundering. And they kept on getting hotter. That little episode in the river was a grammer school picnic with pink lemonade and chocolate cake compared to some of the tights in which Reese and his buddies found themselves as they moved closer to the right answer in this rangeland mystery. They were up against men who didn't like their night riding activities probed, and who said so with any and every weapon that lay to hand, no matter how fiendish.

There was a lost herd somewhere—a thousand head of beef cattle is pretty solid stuff, and it doesn't just vanish into thin air. But there was also a lost locomotive—and, brother, there came darn near being some lost CPA men before the smoke of the last battle—and what a battle that was—cleared away. You'll find it all in THE HERD FROM NOWHERE, by Walker A. Tompkins, in the next issue of this magazine!

Next up on the readin' bill of fare is a novelet by Lee Bond, titled BUSHWHACK BOOMERANG. And we don't know any better way of conveying the tangy flavor of this story than by giving you a fast look at the opening. Thus—

The way the ground seemed to plunge up at him told Jim Benson that he should have slowed

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his big sorrel a little more before quitting the saddle. His high-heeled boots slammed down on the rocky earth, and he did his best to keep on his feet, to prevent the six-shooter from being jarred out of his hand and to watch the brush patches along the draw. He threw his lanky body forward in a hard run the moment he struck the ground, but momentum flipped him over like a foot-roped pony.

But Jim Benson did not notice the bruising he got as he went tumbling end over end in a hard fall. He was thinking of little Rabbit Lawton, lying huddled yonder beside the fence they had been a week stringing around a bog spring, and of the single rifle shot he had heard as he approached.

There's a sample—and if you like action yarns as well as we think you do, you'll want to read all of this one!

Shorts, too, of course, in this adventure-filled next issue. And the departments and other features that go to make up a gratifying fistful of the best Western reading.

LETTERS FROM READERS

AND there goes Hank, the postman, raisin' a big boilin' of caliche dust in his old flivver down the road. We don't know what we'd do without Hank. Course, there's

[*Turn page*]

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the telephone, and the radio, and all, but none of 'em can reach out and fetch in word from you rannies like the mail does. So here we go a whoopin' and a hollerin' and a high-lopin' down the trail to the road—and sure enough, there's more letters and cards to add to the many we already have from all of you, here and there and wherever.

It's too bad, but lack of space won't let us print all the letters we get. But you can bet your last peso we *read* 'em all, and we pay very special attention to hints and suggestions and criticisms contained in them. Because we want the magazine to get steadily better and better, and more to your liking.

Anyway, here are excerpts from some of the letters on hand:

I have read your magazine for some time, and sure enjoy all the stories, though I like Steve Reese, Hank Ball and Dusty Trail the best. I am making a book of your stories on pioneer folk tales for my boy, so keep the stories coming our way.—(*Mrs.*) *Julia Ward, Lucas, Ohio.*

I think that your western books are fine. I live in the second biggest village in Hampshire, and on the outskirts of it are lovely hills, downs and rivers. About three miles from our village is another, called Stockbridge, which people often call the Old Wild West Town. It looks like one because it is down in the valley. I like American and Canadian people.—*Pamela East, King's Arms Cottages, Stockbridge Road, Hampshire, England.*

I am making a collection of cover pictures from RANGE RIDERS WESTERN, as I think your covers are the best to be found. They are true to life, and there is always a lot of real fast action.—*Leroy Paulview, Boston, Mass.*

You could never give me too many of the stories about Steve Reese and his two good, gun-totin' pards, Hank Ball and Dusty Trail. Talk about the three musketeers! Those three can get into—and out of—more tough spots than anyone I know in fiction stories. I have to admit they are generally more than lucky, not to get shot up plenty in some of the situations. But we can skip that. Some people *are* lucky—and these three have the savvy to go with it, which makes all the difference.—*Melvin Kennelly, Great Falls, Mont.*

THE BLOODY BULL TRAIL, by Oscar J. Friend, was one of the best of the Steve Reese series, in my opinion. It had everything that it takes to make a good story—and that's a lot for some of us, who are doggone critical about our heroes and villains. Your short stories ring the bell, too, generally, though now and then one doesn't quite measure up. But who expects perfection? Keep up the good work, and more power to you.—*Sam Aitchison, Memphis, Tenn.*

Hats off to Foghorn Clancy for a swell department in TRAIL CAMP. There is a whole

library of valuable information in those columns, and I have learned more honest-to-gosh facts about the West, both the old West and that of today, in this department than in many books dealing with the subject.—*Brack Stellinger, New York City.*

There you have it, hombres and hombresses. That's all for this time, but don't forget there will be other issues coming up, and we'd like to hear from you right pronto. Please address your letter or postcard to The Editor, RANGE RIDERS WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. And be sure to give us your name and address. *Adios* and best of luck.

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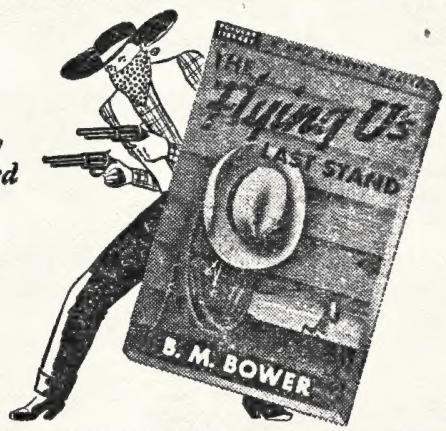

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